

Iraqi Strategy and the Battle for Baghdad

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

Mar 26, 2003

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

Over the past two days, U.S. forces have battled elements of the four Republican Guard (RG) divisions that form the outer ring of Baghdad's defenses, initiating what may be the decisive phase of the coalition's invasion of Iraq. The possibility of urban combat in Baghdad is a daunting one, entailing risks not only for coalition forces, but for the Iraqi regime as well. Although the battle for Baghdad is likely to be the decisive phase of the current campaign, it is unlikely to be the final stage of this conflict. Rather, it will mark the transition to a new phase of what is likely to become a protracted struggle, one that could last as long as U.S. troops remain in Iraq.

Traveling in the Fast Lane

U.S. forces heading to Baghdad have made remarkable progress, in one of the most rapid sustained armored advances in the history of warfare (averaging about 75 miles per day for the first four days). By avoiding major Iraqi military formations and skirting major population centers, U.S. forces racing to Baghdad have surpassed the achievements of the Germans in Russia (1941) and North Africa (1942), the Soviets in the Ukraine (1944) and Manchuria (1945), Israel in the Sinai (1967), and the United States in Iraq during Operation Desert Storm (1991). They have met with unexpectedly stiff and persistent resistance in a number of areas, but losses remain relatively light. A review of personnel attrition rates indicates that, after six days of battle, approximately 20 coalition soldiers have been confirmed killed in action (an average of about 3 per day), whereas more than 150 coalition soldiers were killed during the four-day air-land campaign at the end of Operation Desert Storm (for an average of nearly 40 per day). These numbers provide some context for assessing the pace and intensity of Operation Iraqi Freedom, though at the end of the day, what really matters is whether the United States has met its objectives of disarming Iraq, achieving regime change, and setting the conditions for the emergence of a stable, broad-based post-Saddam government. For this, impending operations in Baghdad could be of critical importance, though it is unclear whether they will facilitate a decisive outcome to the war.

Baghdad: End Point or Way Point?

The coming battle for Baghdad is often characterized in the United States as Saddam Husayn's last stand. In contrast, the Iraqi regime seems to see the looming battle as a decisive, but by no means conclusive chapter in the current struggle. Defeat in Baghdad will mean the fall of the regime, but it will not necessarily mark an end to resistance. Instead, it will signal a new phase in the struggle against the United States.

Saddam has survived numerous close calls and crises (including the most recent known attempt to kill him at the outset of the current invasion), and he seems optimistic that this war is not only survivable, but winnable. This may explain the regime's apparent decision to avoid torching Iraq's oil fields, destroying its infrastructure, gassing civilians, producing massive refugee flows, or launching Scud missiles against Israel. The regime intends to remain in power, and it is therefore unwilling to destroy the country -- at least for now. Moreover, it may believe that such actions would dramatically weaken its relatively favorable international position, which will be a vital asset in the coming phase of the war. And if Iraq's leaders are removed from power, the prospects for a comeback would be significantly harmed if they were to raze the country in the process.

Iraq's Strategy

Iraq's objectives in the coming battle for Baghdad will be to maximize coalition and Iraqi civilian casualties; fight the coalition to a military standoff; and prompt international diplomatic intervention to negotiate a ceasefire in order to end the carnage, thereby securing the regime's survival. International opinion and the regime's diplomatic skills will be crucial to the success of this strategy.

Iraq faces significant obstacles to prosecuting an effective urban warfare strategy. The four RG divisions around the capital have been deployed to slow and wear down U.S. forces, and the regime will probably avoid bringing them into Baghdad (at least while they remain more or less intact) for fear that they might undertake a coup. Should they attempt to fall back to the outskirts of Baghdad, they could suffer heavy losses en route as a result of coalition air strikes (though the current sandstorm might provide concealment for some movements). Those units that make it back to Baghdad will probably lack sufficient numbers or time to establish effective defenses. This job will be left mainly to units of the lightly armed Special Republican Guard (SRG) (with 15,000-25,000 men and some 100 tanks), Special Security Organization (SSO) (with 5,000 men), and Fedayeen-Saddam (with 20,000-40,000 men). These organizations have a major presence in Baghdad, know the city well, and could wage a protracted urban guerrilla war against coalition forces while senior members of the regime escape into the hinterlands.

Baghdad has a Shi'i majority (concentrated mainly in the Saddam City and Kadhimiyya districts) that is by and large hostile to the regime, and which might become actively involved in antiregime activities once coalition forces enter Baghdad. Organized proregime forces will have to watch both their front and rear, and they may find it difficult and dangerous to operate in certain parts of the city. This danger would be somewhat diminished if they were to eschew fixed defensive positions and operate as guerrillas in civilian clothes.

Baghdad poses formidable challenges for the United States as well. Many of the U.S. military's technological advantages would be neutralized in an urban environment. Moreover, even limited fighting in Baghdad could produce significant coalition and civilian casualties, while combat in a historic Arab capital would produce dramatic and jarring images that would further harm America's standing in the Arab world. U.S. forces will likely be met by snipers and bands of fighters in civilian clothes (consisting of a combination of RG, SRG, SSO, and Fedayeen-Saddam personnel). Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz has described Iraqi's concept of urban guerrilla warfare as follows: "[O]ur cities [will] be our swamps, and our buildings our jungles." Although the United States will almost certainly succeed in taking the capital, the question is, at what price?

Will the Regime Collapse . . . or Fade Away to Fight Another Day?

Although the regime may end in a rapid collapse, it is at least as likely that Iraqi leaders will simply go to ground and fade away. In either case, there is a good chance that some members of the current regime -- most likely individuals affiliated with the its security apparatus -- will manage to slip out of Baghdad and return to their home regions (for most, this means the Sunni triangle region north and northwest of Baghdad). Believing that they have not really been defeated -- as many are likely to survive the war -- they may try to organize a protracted, low-intensity insurgency

against the U.S. presence, drawing support from the Sunni Arab community and Shi'i tribes that have supported the regime in the past. Their goal would be to obstruct U.S. efforts to set up a transitional administration and thereby prevent the United States from "winning the peace" and implementing its exit strategy. Their tactics would likely include stoking anti-American sentiment, intimidating or assassinating Iraqis who deal with the United States, and discouraging potential members of a "coalition of the willing" whom Washington might try to enlist in efforts to create a stability force or a transitional administration.

The bottom line is that a definitive end to the current conflict is unlikely. Some kind of low-intensity struggle will probably continue for an indeterminate period -- perhaps as long as U.S. forces remain in Iraq. Although the United States may succeed in dismantling the political and security structures of the current regime and de-Ba'athifying the government, it may have more difficulty expunging an insurgency that, like the government it evolved from, appeals to a powerful sense of Iraqi nationalism, draws strength from the U.S. presence, and derives its resiliency from tribal ties that are rooted in the very fabric of Iraqi society. For these reasons, the battle for Baghdad may mark only the beginning of the end of Saddam Husayn's regime.

Michael Eisenstadt is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute.

Policy #733

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

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

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

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