

# The Long View of No-Fly and No-Augmentation Zones

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](/experts/michael-knights)

Mar 24, 2003

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](/experts/michael-knights)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



## Brief Analysis

Coalition ground forces entered Iraq on the first day of Operation Iraqi Freedom, in contrast to Operation Desert Storm in 1991, when the ground assault followed forty-three days of air strikes involving an average of 2,500 sorties per day. This difference was due in large part to the fact that much of the work of preparing the battlefield had been completed well before the current operation began. Specifically, coalition air forces have long engaged in large-scale activities in Iraq's no-fly and no-augmentation zones, flying as many as 1,000 sorties per day - substantially more than the 700 sorties flown during the first day of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

## Background

Although the northern and southern no-fly zones are linked to UN Security Council Resolutions 688 (April 1991) and 949 (October 1994), the legality of enforcement operations was regularly challenged because the resolutions do not explicitly mention such zones. Yet, Resolution 949 does explicitly authorize what is often referred to as a "no-drive zone" (or what might better be termed a "no-augmentation zone") in southern Iraq. When it was issued in 1994, the resolution demanded "that Iraq immediately complete the withdrawal of all military units recently deployed to southern Iraq to their original positions and that Iraq not again utilize its military or any other forces in a hostile or provocative manner to threaten its neighbors." Hence, the southern no-fly zone is also a no-augmentation zone, meaning that U.S. forces are authorized to counter both air- and ground-based threats there.

Over the past eleven years, violations in these zones have resulted in an average of 34,000 sorties per year over Iraq -- the equivalent of fighting Desert Storm every three years. Iraqi resistance and U.S.-British responses in the no-fly zones steeply escalated following Operation Desert Fox in December 1998. The no-augmentation zone has been enforced less often, though attacks were launched against Iraqi anti-shiping missile (AshM) capabilities there in 1993 and 1998. Operations in the zones conditioned the international community to accept the routine use of force in peacetime. This conditioning blurred the line between war and peace, particularly with regard to the still-evolving science of precision air strikes, where the devil is in the details.

## Preparing the Battlefield

Aerial policing in the Iraqi northern no-fly zone and southern no-fly and no-augmentation zones helped prepare the

current battlefield in several ways:

Air superiority was secured across most of the country (excluding Baghdad) before the war through the gradual degradation of the Iraqi air force and constant strikes against the static and mobile ground-based elements of Iraq's air defense systems.

Information superiority was maintained through the reduction of Iraqi aerial reconnaissance capabilities; attacks on Iraq's general command, control, and communications systems; and, most recently, attacks on mobile radar units at the Iraqi border, which facilitated tactical surprise by reducing Iraq's early warning capabilities.

Psychological operations have greatly benefited from leaflet drops, as well as from the elimination of Iraq's air defenses, which has allowed U.S. EC-130E Commando Solo aircraft to broadcast information to Iraqis without interference.

U.S. force protection capabilities were enhanced by recent attacks on Iraqi ASHMs and surface-to-surface missiles (SSMs). For example, the January 13, 2003, destruction of AshM batteries in southern Iraq has allowed U.S. aircraft carriers to operate far closer to Iraq. In February, U.S. forces also began striking Iraqi Abadil and Astros SSM and artillery positions in the south and Frog-7 SSM batteries in the north. Resolution 949 was used to justify the attacks in the south, while in the north -- which lacks a no-augmentation zone -- the SSMs were deemed to pose an "airborne" threat to the Kurdish minorities and were attacked under the terms of the no-fly zone.

#### Refuting Criticism of the Zones

Open-ended aerial policing has major effects on readiness and retention that are not yet fully understood. It also carries operational risks to both friendly forces and noncombatants. The risk to friendly forces has been considerably reduced in the no-fly zones, as suggested by Iraq's inability to down a single manned aircraft in over a decade of aerial policing. One initial force protection measure was to limit the size of the no-fly zones in order to ensure that patrols retained adequate fuel supplies, remained within easy reach of search-and-rescue forces, and avoided the dense radar, missile, and artillery belts over central Iraq. Even these precautions left U.S. forces at a disadvantage; although enforcement of the no-fly zones ceased at certain latitudes, Iraqi threat rings did not. Consequently, Iraq often fired missiles and artillery into the no-fly zones and even into Kuwait. U.S. forces increasingly responded in kind, using a broadening range of air-launched stand-off weapons and unmanned aerial vehicles to diminish the sanctuary at the edges of the policing zones and reduce risks to friendly forces.

Moreover, precision-guided weapons and improved intelligence support have reduced the risk of harming noncombatants, while improved strike and collateral damage estimation technologies have allowed U.S. forces to operate under somewhat less stringent rules of engagement. The United States has also learned how to debunk false claims of collateral damage and civilian deaths, using tethered satellite imagery to record weapon impacts (for bomb damage assessment purposes) and releasing the footage to disprove Iraqi claims.

Aerial policing is often presented as a choice of gradualism over "shock and awe," yet the two strategies work well in synergy. Establishing air supremacy and suppressing enemy air defenses have historically been the slowest portions of air campaigns and a major impediment to both "shock and awe" and simultaneous air and ground operations. The no-fly and no-augmentation zones allowed the United States to undertake many of the most time-consuming processes of battlefield preparation before Operation Iraqi Freedom began, facilitating near-simultaneous air and ground operations and, if U.S. forces are fully unleashed, even greater parallel strikes against high-value target sets as a means of creating "shock and awe." Overall, the outcome of establishing no-fly and no-augmentation zones in Iraq suggests the utility of aerial policing in the gray zone between war and peace.

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

## RECOMMENDED



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)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,  
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iraq (/policy-analysis/iraq)