

U.S. No-Fly Zones in Iraq: To What End?

[*Phillip Gibbons*](#)

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Since 1991, the United States has averaged over 34,000 military sorties per year in support of no-fly zone operations in Iraq. One might ask, to what effect?

Degrading Saddam's Capabilities

The no-fly zones have neither forced Saddam Husayn to comply with weapons of mass destruction (WMD) inspections nor stopped Iraqi attacks on U.S. and British air patrols. Last year alone, Iraqi military forces engaged coalition aircraft with surface-to-air missiles or antiaircraft fire on more than 500 occasions. In response, coalition forces attacked -- and, for the most part, destroyed -- these missile or artillery sites in thirty-eight separate instances.

In fact, despite the coalition's continuing strikes on air defense sites and partially effective sanctions efforts, it appears that Saddam has actually improved his air defense network. The most significant recent improvement in capability has been the installation of fiber-optic cables, a move that not only protects the Iraqi air defense communications network from attack, but also allows the network to process information faster and prevents the data from being easily monitored by the coalition. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has stated that China was responsible for assisting Iraq with this upgrade, and that this increase in technological capability was the reason behind the February 2001 U.S. attacks against five military command and control sites around Baghdad. Although those attacks were deemed successful, Iraq was able to repair the damage to the network within a few months.

Evolved Mission

Inspired by the 1991 United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 688, the no-fly zone over northern Iraq -- once dubbed Operation Provide Comfort, but renamed Operation Northern Watch (ONW) in 1996 -- was originally designed to support humanitarian efforts by limiting Iraqi military capabilities north of the thirty-sixth parallel. Aircraft were assigned to protect humanitarian operations on the ground, covering U.S. military and aid personnel in the event that they had to flee an attack by Saddam's forces, which did indeed occur in 1996. Although the no-fly zone may have benefited the Kurds in northern Iraq by preventing Saddam from using his aircraft against them, no direct ground support was promised or provided.

The southern no-fly zone, called Operation Southern Watch (OSW), was set up in 1992. The air objective of this zone was to prevent Iraqi fighter aircraft from operating south of the thirty-second parallel (extended in 1996 to the thirty-third parallel). Although one stated purpose of OSW was the protection of the Shi'is in the south, the primary activity of the operation has been to patrol the zone with reconnaissance aircraft, which would allow detection of Iraqi military buildups that might threaten Iraq's southern neighbors.

The current military objectives of the no-fly zones do not emphasize protection of Kurds and Shi'is. As stated by the commander of the U.S. Central Command in his 2001 testimony before Congress, the purpose of the zones is to demonstrate "a continued and significant troop presence to enhance deterrence and show the United States' commitment to force Saddam to comply with sanctions and WMD inspections." They are designed to "provide access and interaction with Gulf governments; ensure Iraq cannot easily repair and improve its antiaircraft capabilities within the no-fly zones; and, ensure [that] the ingress and egress routes that would be necessary to prosecute an expanded war against Iraq remain sufficiently clear of sophisticated surface-to-air missile systems." However, Secretary Rumsfeld recently stated that another goal of the no-fly zones "is to keep good awareness of what [Saddam is] doing with respect to the threats he poses both to the people in the south, the people in the north -- as well as Kuwait."

It is not at all clear what the no-fly zone aircraft could do to protect the Kurds and Shi'is against an all-out ground assault by Saddam. Since neither of the two no-fly zones provide twenty-four-hour coverage, and since the Iraqis have shown that they can detect when coalition aircraft are about to enter (or leave) Iraq, Saddam could mount air attacks anytime outside of the limited no-fly window. Moreover, without committing forces on the ground to aid in targeting Iraqi forces (e.g., the special operations troops used in Afghanistan), it would be almost impossible for U.S. aircraft to stop a full-scale, determined Iraqi ground attack.

Perception inside Iraq

Irrespective of the military reality, it appears that both major Kurdish parties in northern Iraq believe that the no-fly-zone aircraft provide a security guarantee from the United States should Saddam attack. Former secretary of state Madeleine Albright reinforced this belief in a September 2000 speech laying out "red lines" that would generate a U.S. response, which included attacks or provocations against the Kurds, threats against Iraq's neighbors or U.S. forces, or a reconstitution of WMD. In July 2001, Secretary of State Colin Powell went further when he wrote a letter to the two main Kurdish leaders, Jalal Talabani (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) and Masud Barzani (Kurdistan Democratic Party), stating, "As we have said before, should Saddam's forces move against the Kurds, it is our policy that the United States would respond in a strong and sure manner at a time and place of our choosing." This letter was actually the first formal guarantee of U.S. action. It is important to note, however, that the letter did not specify whether the response would be carried out by no-fly-zone forces.

Saddam seems to believe that the northern no-fly zone has placed restrictions on his military forces. Fortunately, there are additional disincentives to his invasion of Kurdish territory. For example, Saddam's current lack of resources may lead him to restrict his limited forces to areas that he can more easily control. After all, even though the Kurdish forces are mostly infantry troops armed only with mortars (and, perhaps, some artillery), Kurds with antitank weapons would probably inflict significant losses on Saddam's heavy armor -- his primary military strength -- as it attempted to negotiate the mountainous terrain. Additionally, Saddam may worry that military action in northern Iraq would cause a reaction from neighboring states, particularly if it created a Kurdish refugee problem that flowed into eastern Turkey or northwestern Iran.

In contrast to the Kurds in the north, the large Shi'a population in the southern marshes of Iraq has never benefited from a relief operation supported by U.S. military forces on the ground. Although the 1994 UNSC Resolution 949 ordered Saddam not to enhance his military presence in the south, he has been free to operate throughout that area with the substantial forces already present there before the resolution. As a result, the Iraqi government has actively persecuted the Shi'a minority and drained the marshes that had supported their villages for centuries. These actions, combined with artillery attacks, have reportedly reduced the Shi'a population in the marsh region by 75 percent over the past few years.

Conclusion

The perception that the U.S. no-fly missions provide protection for the Kurds has become a reality, although the U.S. government has not intended to emphasize this notion. As long as the United States ensures that this "red line" remains clear to Saddam, he is unlikely to expend his limited resources to reclaim northern Iraq.

Lt. Col. Phillip Gibbons is a visiting military fellow at The Washington Institute.