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Iraq Crisis: U.S. and Allied Forces

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Summary

A build-up of U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf began in October 1997, in response to Iraq's refusal to cooperate fully with the work of U.N. weapons inspectors. As the crisis worsened in early 1998, force levels climbed to over 35,000 U.S. military personnel, approximately 275 combat aircraft, and 40 ships, including two aircraft carriers, supplemented by small allied contingents. Though much smaller than the massive coalition assembled after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, U.S. officials believed this force capable of conducting significant military strikes against Iraq if necessary. An agreement in late February 1998 averted a confrontation, but expanded force levels were continued until June. Following redeployments in June, U.S. forces returned to their pre-crisis level of approximately 20,000 military personnel in the Gulf. This report will be revised when a significant change occurs in force levels in the Gulf region. Related reading includes CRS Issue Brief 92117, *Iraqi Compliance with Cease-Fire Agreements* and CRS Report 98-114, *Iraq: International Support for U.S. Policy*.

U.S. Forces Build-up

The defeat of Iraq by the U.S.-led coalition in early 1991 led to a drastic reduction in U.S. force levels, which had reached 540,000 in the Persian Gulf region at the height of the war. Until late 1997, U.S. troop strength in the Gulf fluctuated between 14,000 and 20,000, of whom a majority were embarked on ships, with smaller numbers based in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. These contingents helped enforce a no-fly zone over southern Iraq (Operation Southern Watch), participated in training and joint exercises with Gulf armed forces, guarded U.S. military equipment prepositioned in Gulf countries, and provided a limited deterrent to potential moves by Iraq or possibly Iran. Approximately 200 U.S. combat aircraft and 20 ships (frequently including an aircraft carrier) were in the region at any given time.

In October and November 1997, the United States responded to Iraqi efforts to obstruct the work of U.N. weapons inspectors by sending additional ships and aircraft to the Gulf, including two aircraft carrier groups, six F-117A stealth fighters to Kuwait, eight B-52 bombers to the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia (British territory), and 32 other

combat aircraft to Bahrain. As the crisis intensified, Secretary of Defense William Cohen announced additional deployments on February 4. These reinforcements, which began moving to the Gulf region in mid-February, included 19 more fighters and bombers, the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit (over 2,000 combat personnel) aboard ships, and Army aviation and mechanized units (approximately 5,000-6,000) which joined 1,500 Army troops that were already in Kuwait.

Table 1 shows U.S. forces in the Gulf at the height of the build-up, as well as a U.S. air contingent based in Turkey (technically outside the Gulf region but committed to enforcing a no-fly zone over northern Iraq).¹ Some U.S. military assets in the region might not have been available for use in the event of a military operation against Iraq, notably the 24 fighter aircraft in Turkey and the 50-60 fighter aircraft in Saudi Arabia. Saudi authorities are reluctant to permit air strikes against Iraq from Saudi bases, although they reportedly were willing to allow operations by non-combat support aircraft. Even without the use of Saudi-based fighters, the U.S. area commander General Anthony Zinni expressed the view that U.S. forces in the region could carry out a “very substantial” operation against Iraq.²

Location	Personnel	Ships	Combat Aircraft
Afloat--5th Fleet	19,000	20 ^a	103 F-14, FA-18, EA-6B
Afloat--MSC ^b	189 ^c	22	---
Kuwait	7,000-8,000	---	12 F-117A; 6 F-16; 18 A-10
Saudi Arabia	5,000-6,000	---	50-60 F-15, F-16
Bahrain	1,500	---	36 F-15, F-16; 3 B-1
Other Gulf	100	---	(support aircraft)
Turkey (Operation Northern Watch)	1,300	---	24 F-15, F-16
Diego Garcia	100	---	14 B-52
<i>Totals (not additive)</i>	<i>approx. 35,000</i>	<i>40+</i>	<i>approx. 275^d</i>

^aIncluding two aircraft carriers.

^bMilitary Sealift Command. Number of ships (mainly supply ships) changes with some frequency.

^cPlus 870 civilian mariners, 64 scientists. Numbers of personnel fluctuate.

^dPress cited 300-350; may have included support aircraft as well as combat aircraft.

Sources: Department of Defense; Press. The number of personnel in smaller Gulf states and Diego Garcia represents estimates.

¹According to a Defense Department spokesman on May 26, 1998, at one point during the crisis U.S. forces in the Gulf region peaked at 44,000. This strength figure probably was reached during a brief period in February when there were three aircraft carriers in the Gulf.

²Steven Lee Myers, “U.S. Will Not Ask to Use Saudi Bases for a Raid on Iraq,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 9, 1998, p. A1.

Allied Forces (Non-U.S.)

Widespread reluctance in the international community to resort to force against Iraq prevented the United States from assembling a large multinational force like the 35-member coalition that defeated Iraq in 1991. The United Kingdom deployed an aircraft carrier and associated units to the Gulf; Canada sent a frigate and transport aircraft; and Australia and New Zealand sent tanker and surveillance aircraft, respectively, together with small contingents of commandos. Other donor countries offered administrative and logistical rather than combat units: Argentina, Denmark, and Hungary promised medical and humanitarian teams. Poland offered an anti-chemical unit, and the Czech Republic and Romania offered unspecified military support, if needed. Total allied forces deployed or committed came to less than 4,000 personnel, only a fraction of the roughly 210,000-strong allied force committed during the 1991 Gulf war.

Other states indicated their willingness to support military action. On March 4, Under Secretary of State Thomas R. Pickering told foreign journalists that “there is now a coalition of some 20 states” who will engage in a military operation against Iraq if it should take place. Presumably, the total of 20 states included the allied countries mentioned above, but Secretary Pickering did not name the countries or indicate the degree of support they might provide.³

Table 2 shows allied forces in the Gulf region at the height of the build-up. None of the six countries comprising the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC, consisting of Saudi Arabia and five smaller Gulf neighbors) committed themselves to participate in a military campaign against Iraq. Consequently, the table does not include any of the approximately 300,000 military personnel serving in the armed forces of GCC countries, which were key members of the allied coalition in 1990-1991. It is possible that one or more of these countries might have decided to play an active role in a campaign if the situation had developed into a more serious confrontation. A likely candidate might have been Kuwait, where memories of the 1990 Iraqi invasion are still fresh. Kuwait put its 16,000-member armed forces on a higher state of alert during the crisis. For further information on allied support and positions of other countries regarding the present crisis, see CRS Report 98-114, *Iraq: International Support for U.S. Policy*.

³According to a news report, State Department officials met with ambassadors of over 30 countries (10 more than the number cited in the Pickering briefing) that had promised to provide troops or other support to a military coalition. Patrick Worsnip, “Clinton warns Iraq to comply--or else,” Reuters news wire, March 3, 1998, 00:50 AET. It seems likely that most of these countries offered modest logistical support rather than troop deployments.

Table 2. Allied Forces Committed to the Persian Gulf Region			
Country	Personnel	Ships	Combat Aircraft
Argentina	100	---	---
Australia	250	---	2 tankers (Boeing 707)
Belgium	unknown	1 ^a	---
Canada	300-400	1 ^a	2 tankers (KC-130)
Chile	41	---	5 helicopters
Denmark	33	---	1 transport (C-130)
Hungary	50	---	---
Netherlands	unknown	1 ^a	---
New Zealand	70	---	2 surveillance aircraft (P-3K)
Norway	20-30	---	1 transport (C-130)
Poland	216	---	---
United Kingdom	2,500	5 ^b	20 Tornado; 25 Harrier

^aFrigate

^bIncluding one aircraft carrier

Notes:

- (1) Above forces were promised, but not all were actually deployed.
- (2) In addition, the Czech Republic and Romania reportedly offered contingents if needed.

Sources: Press

Redeployments

Although the crisis eased following the agreement reached between the U.N. Secretary General and the Iraqi leadership on February 23, the United States maintained its enhanced force levels in the Gulf for another three months. On March 4, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, quoting President Clinton, told a subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee that “Our soldiers, our ships, our planes will stay there in force until we are satisfied Iraq is complying with its commitments.”

During May, as the crisis continued to recede, Administration officials became increasingly concerned that the large-scale U.S. military presence in the Gulf was affecting U.S. force readiness and creating domestic problems for U.S. allies. On May 26, President Clinton ordered a reduction of U.S. forces, beginning with the return of one of the two aircraft carriers, the *U.S.S. Independence*, to the Pacific. The *Independence* departed the Gulf region on May 27. Other withdrawals took place in early June: the Air Expeditionary Force in Bahrain (approximately 40 combat aircraft); all 12 F-117A “Stealth” fighters in Kuwait; a brigade and other ground force units in Kuwait; and some of the 14 B-52 bombers and support aircraft in Diego Garcia. Allies began withdrawing their contingents as well.

Defense officials announced that at least one aircraft carrier would remain in the Gulf for the foreseeable future and another would be nearby in the Mediterranean. A Defense spokesman said the United States will maintain a task force of approximately 1,200 ground force personnel in Kuwait almost constantly to conduct training with Kuwaiti forces on equipment prepositioned in Kuwait, along with a multiple launch rocket system battery and additional helicopters. In addition, according to Defense officials, the United States is keeping "a very powerful force of cruise missiles" in the Gulf region. Besides these forces, other contingents are remaining in the Gulf to continue enforcing overflights of southern Iraq (Operation Southern Watch), maintaining maritime interception operations, and conducting training activities with Gulf allies. According to Defense officials, after the withdrawals, U.S. forces in the Gulf will average approximately 20,000, varying perhaps as much as 2,000 above or below that level, and 150-200 aircraft.

Tensions with Iraq increased late in the summer of 1998. In spite of its February 23 agreement to permit unfettered access by U.N. weapons inspectors, the Iraqi Government announced on August 5 that it would end cooperation with the U.N. Special Commission (UNSCOM) charged with conducting weapons inspections until certain demands were met. (One of these demands, reportedly, is the reconfiguration of UNSCOM in such a way as to reduce U.S. and British influence in the commission.) On August 12, 1998, the Defense Department public affairs officer told reporters that "We have a very strong force ready to, and able to, defend our interests and to put pressure on Saddam Hussein if necessary." Total U.S. strength in the Gulf as of August 12, he said, was 19,650 personnel, including 11,000 sailors and Marines (mostly embarked on ships), 5,900 Air Force personnel, 2,300 Army personnel, and 450 in joint headquarters. He maintained that U.S. forces in the Gulf are more powerful than they were before the build-up that began in late 1997 (for example, the number of cruise missiles is about twice the number in the region last year), and pointed out that they can be reinforced substantially within 48 hours if need arises.