

# When the shooting starts...

**B**y the time this column appears, U.S. forces may already have gone into action against Iraq. If not, it's likely that fighting could break out at any time as the angry American eagle swoops down on defiant Iraq.

Most analysts have been predicting that Iraq will invade Saudi Arabia. Seven crack Iraqi armored and mechanized divisions have moved up to the Saudi-Kuwaiti border. From there, Iraqi troops are 250 miles away from the Dhahran-Ras Tanura-Hofuf triangle which contains a large part of Saudi Arabia's oil infrastructure. This means one day's fast drive for recon units and perhaps two days for armor carried on flatbed trucks — provided the advancing Iraqi columns were not subjected to air attack.

But I don't think Iraq's leader, Saddam Hussein, originally had any intention of invading Saudi Arabia after his annexation of Kuwait. Even a man of Saddam's enormous gall knows that such an act would immediately spark a no-win war with the U.S. and some of its allies.

However, now that U.S. air and ground forces are flying into Saudi bases around Hofuf, Dhahran and Riyadh, Saddam must face a difficult decision: Either attack the airstrips used by incoming U.S. forces, preventing them from bringing in more troops and planes; or else sit back and watch the U.S. concentrate an overwhelming force of warships, strike aircraft, fighters and heavy bombers that could quickly begin attacking economic and military targets in Iraq.

Iraqi generals must be expecting a major attack. Even the U.S. cannot afford the vast cost of keeping so mighty a force deployed in and around Arabia indefinitely. Once its military buildup is completed, the U.S. will likely issue Baghdad an ultimatum to get out of Kuwait and then attack.

Iraq's only viable military option is to launch preemptive strikes at Saudi airbases with its MiG-23, Mirage F-1 and SU-7/20 fighter bombers. Even this may not work. During the Gulf War with Iran, the Iraqi air force proved incapable of supporting ground troops, and wholly inept at knocking out enemy air bases, at air combat or long-range interdiction.

In other words, Iraq's large but outdated 500-combat plane air force is pretty ineffectual and would not last more than a few days against high-tech U.S. F-15s and F-16s. Nor would Iraq's much-ballyhooed force of Scud missiles be of much use. They are too inaccurate to take out air bases.

Dropping toxic gas and blistering agents on Saudi air bases would slow down U.S. operations, but it's doubtful whether the Iraqis could deliver sufficient quantities of gas by air. To be effective, gas weapons are best delivered by artillery in massive amounts.

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On the other hand, flyers of the U.S. Air Force and Navy could do terrible damage to Iraq. Even if Saddam decided to send his armor into Saudi Arabia, without adequate top cover and mobile anti-aircraft weapons it would be slaughtered by U.S. and Saudi aircraft. Just moving armor and supplies forward in the 130-degree heat is an undertaking that would strain Iraq's poor logistic abilities.

During the Gulf War, the Iraqi Army couldn't sustain an advance of more than 25 miles before running out of supplies. U.S. aircraft, including B-52 heavy bombers, could demolish Iraq's oil industry, cut its pipelines, mine its harbors and smash bridges, dams and generating plants. Iraq would be bombed back into the Stone Age.

This does not mean the Iraqis would be beaten, but they certainly wouldn't have any offensive power left. In fact, they probably don't have much even today. In spite of huge numbers — some one million men — Iraq's armed forces are good only for fighting static warfare. In the eight-year Gulf

War, Iraq and Iran both barely managed to attain the combat capabilities of World War I Balkan armies.

Even with its powerful armored forces, the Iraqis still don't have a modern, mobile army or the capability of keeping it supplied in the field. Consequently, Saddam will be more likely to dig his troops into defensive positions and wait for U.S. attacks than to send his men and tanks to be wiped out in the Saudi sands — as the Egyptians were in Sinai in 1967.

For its part, the U.S. will avoid ground combat, since it lacks troops in Saudi Arabia for such fighting, and will confine its efforts to air, commando and naval action.

Bombing the Iraqis may not make them yell "Uncle" — as Vietnam showed. Unless the Iraqi Army overthrows Saddam, he is going to be hard to dislodge from Kuwait — now dubbed "liberated south Iraq" — or from his own capital. Infantry and tanks are needed for a nasty job like this and right now they are not available.

And don't forget those two old Iraqi-haters, Iran and Israel. They both might just decide to jump in and have a go at unloved Saddam Hussein.

