

Crisis in Iraq: Operation PROVIDE COMFORT

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DATES: April 5, 1991–December 31, 1996

LOCATIONS: Southeastern Turkey and Northern Iraq

OVERSEAS BASES USED: Incirlik Air Base (AB), Adana, Antalya, Diyarbakir, Silopi, Batman, Turkey; Sirsenk, Iraq; Rhein-Main AB, Germany

AIR FORCE ORGANIZATIONS:

DIVISION:	WINGS: (con't.)	WINGS: (con't.)
322d Airlift	81st Tactical Fighter (later, 81st Fighter)	419th Fighter
	86th Tactical Fighter (later, 86th Wing, 86th Fighter)	435th Tactical Airlift
WINGS:	92d Air Refueling	436th Military Airlift
1st Fighter	100th Air Refueling	437th Military Airlift
3d Wing	131st Fighter	463d Tactical Airlift
16th Special Operations	132d Fighter	552d Airborne Warning and Control (later, 552d Air Control)
19th Air Refueling	138th Fighter	Composite Wing (Provisional), 7440th
20th Tactical Fighter (later, 20th Fighter)	140th Fighter	
22d Air Refueling	154th Composite	GROUPS:
27th Fighter	174th Fighter	1st Rescue
36th Tactical Fighter (later, 36th Fighter)	180th Fighter	10th Special Forces
39th Special Operations	192d Fighter	32d Fighter
39th Wing	302d Tactical Airlift	39th Tactical (later, 39th Operations)
48th Fighter	306th Strategic	43d Air Refueling
52d Tactical Fighter (later, 52d Fighter)	314th Tactical Airlift (later, 314th Airlift)	124th Fighter
57th Wing	317th Tactical Airlift	143d Tactical Airlift
60th Military Airlift	349th Military Airlift	154th Composite
66th Electronic Combat	366th Wing	159th Fighter

AIR FORCE ORGANIZATIONS: (con't.)

GROUPS: (con't.)	SQUADRONS:	SQUADRONS: (con't.)
185th Fighter	21st Special Operations	92d Air Refueling
187th Fighter	32d Fighter	93d Air Refueling
192d Fighter	43d Electronic Combat	114th Fighter
313th Tactical Airlift	58th Military Airlift (later, 58th Airlift)	123d Tactical Reconnaissance
352d Special Operations	67th Special Operations	911th Air Refueling
944th Fighter	91st Air Refueling	

AIR FORCE AIRCRAFT: A-10, C-5, C-12, C-21, C-130, C-141, E-3, EC-130, EF-111, F-4, F-15, F-16, F-111, HC-130, KC-10, KC-135, MH-53, RC-135, RF-4

Operations

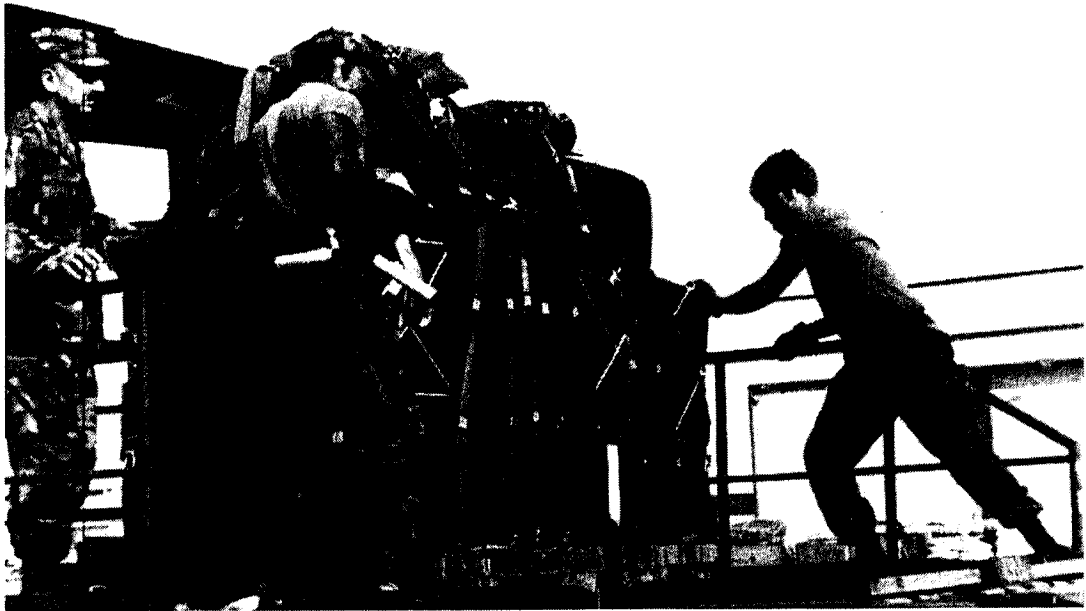
When an American-led international coalition bombed Iraq and drove the forces of Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1991, it weakened his power. Rebellious Kurds in northern Iraq, whom Hussein had brutally suppressed with chemical weapons three years earlier, launched a new uprising in early March. When Iraqi government troops defeated the rebellion a month later, threatening to repeat the massacres of the past, more than a million Kurds fled to Iran and Turkey. Hundreds of thousands more gathered on cold mountain slopes on the Iraqi-Turkish border. Lacking food, clean water, clothing, blankets, medical supplies and shelter, the refugees suffered enormous mortality rates.

On April 3, the United Nations Security Council authorized a humanitarian relief effort for the Iraqi Kurds. During the first week in April, the United States organized a combined task force for Operation PROVIDE COMFORT. Maj. Gen. James L. Jamerson, USAF, served as first commander. USAF C-130 cargo airplanes, which had deployed mostly from bases in Germany to Incirlik AB, Turkey, began air-dropping relief supplies directly to Kurdish refugees in the mountainous Iraqi border area on April 7. They delivered about 600 pallets of relief supplies per day, staging at Diyarbakir and Batman in southern and eastern Turkey. But airdrops alone proved to be inadequate. The refugees needed different quantities and

types of cargo than those chosen for delivery, not enough cargo reached the people who needed it most, and some items actually landed on refugees, killing or injuring them. Moreover, the operation failed to address the root of the problem. The refugees could not stay where they were, and Turkey, faced with a restive Kurdish population of its own, refused to admit them in large numbers. PROVIDE COMFORT, therefore, evolved into a larger operation, with more than one phase, and the use of American ground troops.

On April 17, 1991, Lt. Gen. John M. Shalikashvili, USA, took command of the PROVIDE COMFORT Combined Task Force, and General Jamerson became commander of the air component. With United Nation's (UN) approval, Shalikashvili built temporary camps in northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey so that the refugees could come out from the mountains. He could better identify the needs of the refugees once they were in the camps. General Shalikashvili's next step was to enforce a security zone for the Kurds in northern Iraq so that they would feel safe enough to return to their homes. Once there, they would no longer need so many relief supplies. At first, such a security zone required extensive coalition ground and air forces. In a month, the Combined Task Force strength grew beyond 20,000 members. Over half of these were Americans, but the forces of twelve other countries participated in the operation.

Between mid-April and mid-July, General Shalikashvili and his task force were able to accomplish their immediate goals in the first phase of PROVIDE COMFORT. The Iraqi army withdrew from a security zone that eventually embraced the cities of Zakho, Al Amadiyah (Amadiya), Suri, and Dihok (Dahuk) and covered several thousand square miles. Shalikashvili met periodically with Iraqi military officials to avoid misunderstandings. USN sea-lift ships transported cargo to ports in Turkey for shipment by truck and helicopter to the Iraqi-Turkish border area. USAF cargo aircraft, including C-5 Galaxies and C-141 Starlifters, also moved thousands of tons of relief supplies from the United States to Turkey, flying via Germany to Incirlik, Adana, and Diyarbakir. During the first twenty days of PROVIDE COMFORT, C-5s and C-141s flew seventy-five missions from the United States and Europe to Turkey. C-5s

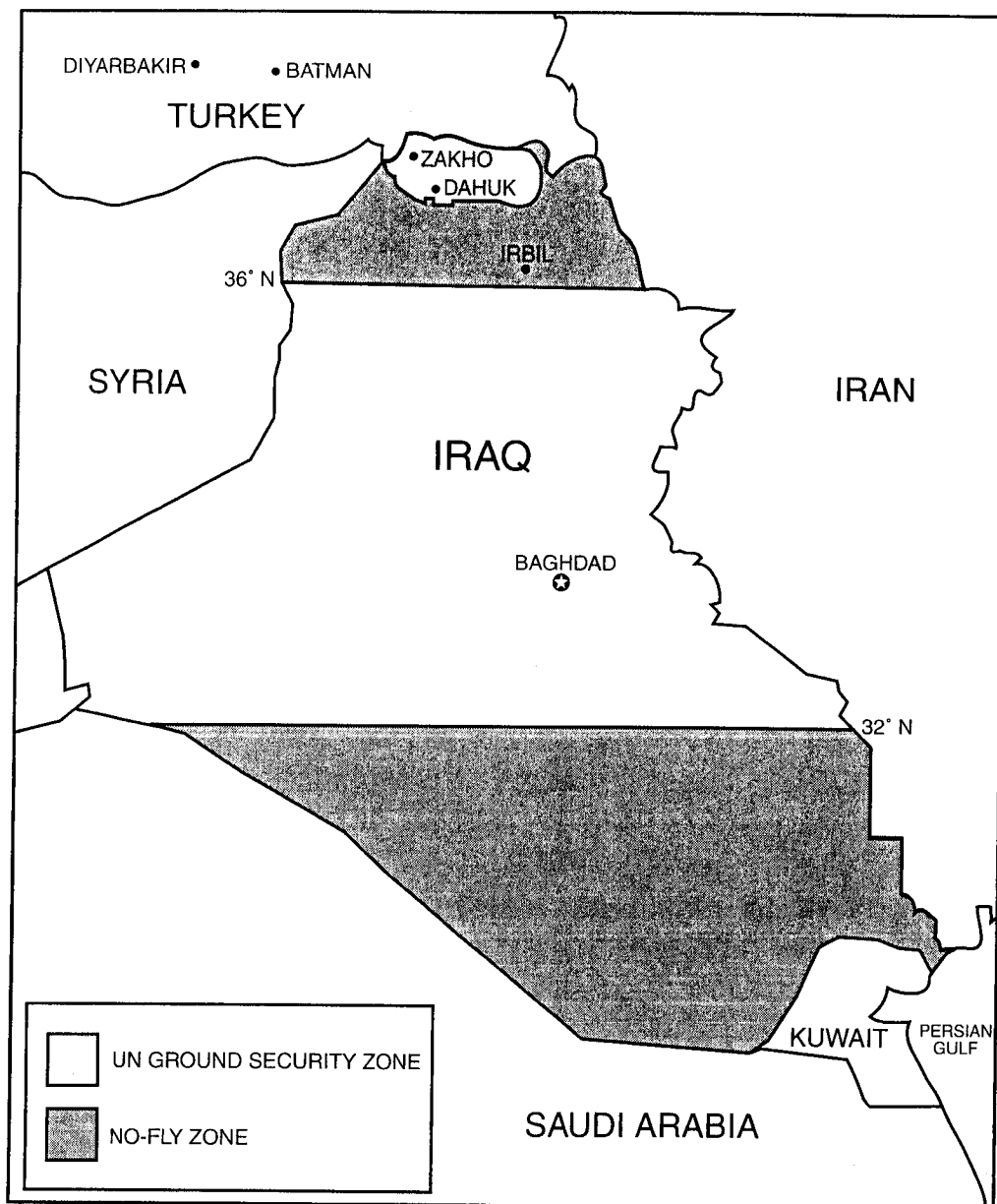


USAF enlisted men prepare to load a C-130 for Operation PROVIDE COMFORT.

also transported allied troops from Italy to eastern Turkey, and from there they moved overland to Zakho. The Air Force used C-130s to deliver cargo from eastern Turkey to Sirsenk Airfield in the security zone. By mid-July 1991, USAF airplanes had transported more than 7,000 tons of PROVIDE COMFORT relief supplies.

U.S. and coalition fighter aircraft provided air cover for the PROVIDE COMFORT ground forces in the security zone. The combination of air cover and ground forces, along with a promise of some degree of autonomy from Baghdad, persuaded most Kurdish refugees to return to their homes. By the end of May, only about 41,000 refugees remained in the camps. On June 7, the United Nations resolved to send forces to replace those of the American-led coalition, and by the middle of July, the PROVIDE COMFORT Combined Task Force withdrew from northern Iraq. A six-nation coalition ground force remained in southern Turkey, ready to enter Iraq again if necessary. Thus ended PROVIDE COMFORT I.

The second phase of PROVIDE COMFORT, which began in mid-July 1991, enforced the established security zone with U.S., British, French, and Turkish air power. All PROVIDE COMFORT II commanders, beginning with General Jamerson, were USAF generals. Coalition ground forces withdrew from



No-Fly Zones in Iraq during Operation PROVIDE COMFORT

southern Turkey at the end of September, increasing the burden on the remaining air units. By the end of the year, USAF members assigned to PROVIDE COMFORT still numbered more than a thousand, but the number of U.S. Army, Navy, and Marine Corps declined to less than 200. The coalition enforced a no-fly zone over northern Iraq, north of 36° N, from which Iraqi aircraft were forbidden. This no-fly zone covered more area than the UN security zone on the ground.

PROVIDE COMFORT relied increasingly on fighters as its primary missions evolved to enforcement of the no-fly zone, reconnaissance over the area, and readiness to retaliate if the forces of Saddam Hussein attacked the Kurds again. Humanitarian airlift, however, did not completely disappear. USAF C-5s, C-141s, C-130s, and KC-10s, supplemented with coalition aircraft and commercial airplanes, transported 119 tons of food and water and more than 4,000 bundles of clothing to the Iraqi Kurds during the winter of 1991-92.

Concerned that U.S. and UN support for the Kurds in Iraq might encourage Kurdish separatists in Turkey, Turkish military authorities demanded and received co-command of Operation PROVIDE COMFORT. With this arrangement, the Turks gained operational control over their own PROVIDE COMFORT troops. The Turkish government, which looked on the operation as a mixed blessing, allowed it to continue only by approving short-term extensions. The Turks wanted to discourage the Kurds of northern Iraq from crossing the border into Turkey, but the government also feared creation of a Kurdish state in Iraq that might have encouraged the 10 million Kurds in Turkey to create a state of their own. The PROVIDE COMFORT forces came to Turkey's relief in February, March, and April 1992, after avalanches and an earthquake inspired USAF humanitarian airlifts. In the long run, Operation PROVIDE COMFORT proved to be as much in the interest of Turkey as of the Iraqi Kurds. The coalition persuaded the Iraqi Kurds to refuse to cooperate with Turkish Kurds in separatist activities or to allow their territory to be used for cross-border raids.

In August 1992, the United States established another no-fly zone, this time in southern Iraq south of 32° N, to discourage renewed Iraqi military activity near Kuwait (Operation SOUTHERN WATCH). It complemented the PROVIDE COMFORT no-fly zone north of 36° N. Iraqi forces tested the no-fly zones in both south and north by sending fighters into them in December 1992 and January 1993. On December 27, 1992, F-16 pilot Lt. Col. Gary L. North, USAF, shot down an Iraqi MiG-25 in the southern zone. Less than a month later, on January 17, 1993, another F-16 pilot, Lt. Craig D. Stevenson, USAF, shot down an Iraqi MIG-29 in the north. Those were the only aerial victories of Operation PROVIDE COMFORT.

In January and June 1993, USN warships fired cruise missiles into Iraq to destroy a suspected nuclear facility and to punish Saddam Hussein for an attempt to assassinate former U.S. President George H. W. Bush. In January, April, June, July, and August 1993, USAF aircraft attacked Iraqi anti-aircraft and radar sites in both the northern and southern no-fly zones after they fired at or locked onto coalition patrol aircraft. In 1994, Iraqi troops massed near Kuwait, prompting the United States to deploy more forces to Southwest Asia (Operation VIGILANT WARRIOR).

After 1993, Saddam Hussein did not often challenge coalition aircraft patrolling the no-fly zones, but U.S. units remained wary. On April 14, 1994, two American F-15s patrolling the northern no-fly zone accidentally shot down two USA UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters, killing twenty-six people, including fifteen Americans. Misidentifying the helicopters as hostile, the F-15 pilots failed to receive contrary information from either the helicopters or an orbiting E-3 aircraft. The "friendly fire" incident aroused negative public opinion and a demand for changes to prevent such accidents in the future.

The Iraqi Kurds did not maintain a united front against Saddam Hussein. One faction, eager to assert its power over another, invited the Iraqi army to help it take control of the city of Irbil in the American-protected no-fly zone. Iraqi tanks took the city in August 1996. Anxious to discourage Saddam Hussein from further military adventures, U.S. President William J. Clinton responded by expanding the southern no-fly zone to 33° N and clearing the additional territory of crucial air defenses by firing forty-four cruise missiles from USN ships and USAF B-52s (Operation DESERT STRIKE). During the same month, Iraqi forces fired a surface-to-air missile at a pair of F-16s patrolling the northern no-fly zone but activated the radar too briefly to score a hit or to reveal its location for an effective counterstrike.

Kurds of the defeated faction fled to the Turkish border. In Operations QUICK TRANSIT I, II, and III, the United States helped them move to safe areas in Turkey. Almost 7,000 refugees flew on to Andersen Air Force Base in Guam to be processed for eventual settlement in the United States (Operation PACIFIC HAVEN).

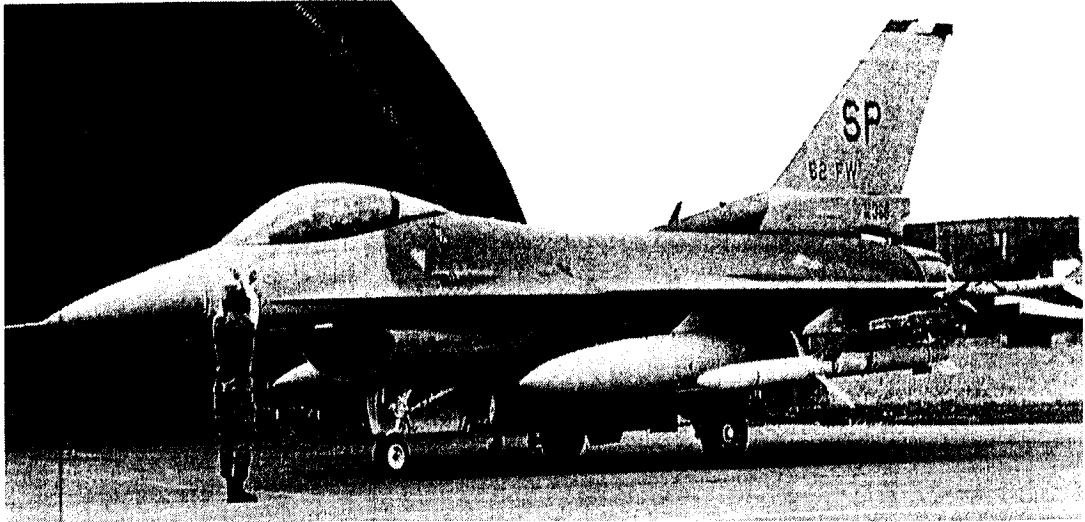
At the beginning of 1997, Operation NORTHERN WATCH replaced Operation PROVIDE COMFORT, which had ceased to be a predominantly humanitarian operation, to complement Operation SOUTHERN WATCH. The two security zones in northern and southern Iraq discouraged Saddam Hussein not only from acts of genocide against his people in those areas but also from invading Kuwait again.

Foremost among the lessons PROVIDE COMFORT taught was the need to avoid fratricide. The downing of the two USA helicopters generated a thorough investigation that led to changes in organization, procedures, training, and the rules of engagement. Maj. Gen. James Andrus, USAF, Commander, Third Air Force, led the initial investigation. Air Force Chief of Staff General Ronald R. Fogleman, who replaced General Merrill A. McPeak in October 1994, personally reviewed the cases of those involved to prevent such a situation from happening again.

The operation also revealed the limitations of airdrops alone. At first, U.S. transports dropped some food and clothing the Kurds refused to eat or wear, because planners did not realize what cargo was appropriate for the culture. The Air Force also had to reduce chances that air-dropped cargo would land on the very people it was designed to assist. More accurate intelligence assessments when the operation began could have precluded the extensive operational modifications that occurred later.

Operation PROVIDE COMFORT exposed some host-country problems. Distrustful of the Kurds in their own country, the Turks were reluctant to support an operation to help Kurds in Iraq. The Turkish government gave approval to the operation for only up to six months at a time and limited the number of coalition combat aircraft in the operation to forty-eight at a time. Turkey also waged a war against its own Kurds during PROVIDE COMFORT, which complicated the operation when Kurdish separatists sometimes mistook American aircraft for those of the Turks.

Friction among rival Kurdish factions in northern Iraq threatened PROVIDE COMFORT by giving Saddam Hussein an excuse to take the Kurdish city of Irbil in the no-fly zone. In future contingencies, the United States and its coalition partners should be more familiar with the divisions among the



A 52d Fighter Wing F-16 at Incirlik AB, Turkey, for Operation PROVIDE COMFORT duty.

people they are trying to assist, especially if such divisions could undermine the operation.

The need for alternative bases was another lesson to emerge from the PROVIDE COMFORT experience. Although fighters continued to operate from Incirlik throughout the operation, runway construction there forced larger aircraft such as E-3s, tankers, and strategic transports to use bases at Antalya, Adana, and elsewhere.

Operation PROVIDE COMFORT challenged the readiness of the U.S. Air Forces in Europe (USAFE). While USAFE personnel and aircraft decreased because of the post-Cold War reduction of forces, they were committed simultaneously in Turkey, Bosnia, and central Africa. The PROVIDE COMFORT patrols ate up flying hours that USAFE would have preferred to use for training. Command leaders, fearing that they were overextended, persuaded the U.S. Air Force to rotate more people and aircraft from other commands to serve in PROVIDE COMFORT.

The operation suffered from confusing definitions of territorial responsibility. The no-fly zone was larger than the security zone on the ground, which Iraqi troops were forbidden to enter. This allowed Iraqi troops to move anti-aircraft weapons and radar into the territory below the no-fly zone, increasing the risk to coalition aircraft. The line between the areas for which the U.S. European Command and U.S. Central Command

were responsible ran along the border between Turkey and Iraq. PROVIDE COMFORT bases were located in the U.S. European Command's area of responsibility, but the PROVIDE COMFORT no-fly zone was technically in the U.S. Central Command's zone. To solve the problem, Central Command allowed the European Command to patrol northern Iraq, while it concentrated on the southern no-fly zone.

One other problem that emerged from PROVIDE COMFORT was the absence of an exit policy. Strategists in Washington did not define a desired end state that would justify termination of the operation. No one knew exactly how long the no-fly zone over northern Iraq would have to be enforced, and PROVIDE COMFORT was eventually replaced by another operation with a different name but the same basic mission.

Despite mistakes and serious problems, Operation PROVIDE COMFORT succeeded in its purpose. It saved the lives of thousands of Kurdish refugees. By encouraging them to return to their homes in northern Iraq, it reduced hostile ethnic pressure on Turkey, a key North Atlantic Treaty Organization ally. It prevented Saddam Hussein from having a free hand in the northern part of his country, discouraging him from repeating genocidal incidents against the Kurdish minority. Operation PROVIDE COMFORT set a precedent for no-fly zones elsewhere, serving as a model for Operation SOUTHERN WATCH in southern Iraq and Operation DENY FLIGHT in Bosnia. Finally, PROVIDE COMFORT, in conjunction with SOUTHERN WATCH, discouraged Iraq from invading tiny Kuwait again. Saddam Hussein learned that his northern flank was as exposed as his southern to readily available airpower resources.