

US steps up war preparations against Iraq

The Editorial Board
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Washington is escalating its preparations to launch multiple air strikes on Iraq, even as the pretense of broad international support grows increasingly threadbare. With the bulk of governments in the Persian Gulf and Europe on record opposing US plans for a sustained aerial assault, the role of the United States as the main instigator of military violence around the world emerges ever more clearly.

Numerous reports have predicted that the bombing will commence within the next week to 10 days. The British daily *Independent* cited unnamed sources in Washington who said US warplanes and cruise missiles would begin striking Iraqi targets on February 17. The London-based *Al Hayat* newspaper quoted unidentified Egyptian officials who said Washington had given Baghdad a February 17 deadline to submit to US demands or face attack.

The *Wall Street Journal* in a February 10 article headlined: "An Attack on Iraq Grows More Likely; US Plans to be Ready in 7 to 10 Days" listed two reasons why an attack seems increasingly certain. It noted that some Persian Gulf regimes, while publicly opposing a US air assault, are privately complaining to American officials that the past cycle of small-scale air strikes, followed by diplomatic wrangling, followed by another round of limited military action, has only undermined US authority. Secondly, the American military is concerned that the repeated dispatch of American forces to the region, without any resolution in the confrontation with Iraq, is eroding morale.

These factors, according to the *Journal*, are buttressing the consensus within US ruling circles in favor of war. Defense Secretary William Cohen and other US officials, the *Journal* reported, "aren't interested in negotiating with Iraq."

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright went to Capitol Hill on Tuesday, but her mission was not to head off significant opposition within Congress to another attack on the Iraqi population. Such opposition is virtually nonexistent, on either side of the aisle. Her main aim was

to reassure those within both parties who maintain that Clinton's plans for large-scale bombing of Baghdad and other civilian centers do not go far enough. The US is ready to "strike and strike again," Albright told Congress.

By the beginning of next week, US forces in the Persian Gulf will be at their peak. The Pentagon will be able to count on three of its own aircraft carrier battle groups as well as a fourth deployed by the British. An additional 49 US warplanes have been dispatched to the region, joining the 370 which are already in place.

Washington has amassed an arsenal of sophisticated weaponry—led by B-1, B-52 and Stealth bombers, together with sea-launched cruise missiles—which is even more powerful than the air strike force which devastated Iraq in 1991. Even without the use of US planes based in Saudi Arabia, it is in a position to carry out the carpet-bombing of Iraqi population centers, inflicting thousands if not hundreds of thousands of casualties.

The US is also sending 3,000 more ground troops to Kuwait, reinforcing 1,500 army troops already there on preplanned maneuvers. Large numbers of M1-A1 tanks, armored troop carriers and other military vehicles have been taken out of the stockpiles that were placed in the Arab sheikdom following the 1991 Persian Gulf war.

As the deployment of forces nears its completion and the actual assault approaches, certain differences are emerging within the press and even in the military over the advisability of a sustained air assault. The Republican leadership in Congress, together with a number of Democrats, has begun to criticize Clinton's war aims and insist that any US operation have as its objective the physical elimination of Saddam Hussein. None of the politicians arguing for this position have presented a credible plan for carrying it out, nor any conception of what political forces would constitute a "post-Saddam" regime.

Most have shied away from the clear implication that US ground troops would be used to invade and indefinitely occupy a country of 22 million people. This, however, is the logic of the escalating confrontation in the

Persian Gulf.

Charles Horner, the retired air force general who directed the air assault on Iraq in 1991, recently published a column in the *New York Times* warning that "force could have negative consequences." He pointed to the destabilizing effect a major attack on Iraq could have on pro-American regimes in the region, and the danger of mass opposition at home once American troops were to begin to suffer injury and death.

Similarly, Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf, the chief commander in the gulf war, declared that bombs and missiles could not achieve Clinton's stated aim of destroying Iraq's capacity to develop biological and chemical weapons. He said that an American air assault could result in strengthening the Iraqi leadership, "as took place in the bombing of North Vietnam."

Partly in answer to such cautionary statements, some media analysts are speaking more bluntly about America's real war aims in the gulf. A column by Roger Cohen in last Sunday's *New York Times* broached in unusually plain language some of the strategic concerns that underlie the current war drive.

"Beyond the destruction of chemical and biological weapons," Cohen wrote, "an eventual bombing campaign would serve several long-term US interests in the region: the maintenance of a weak Iraq, but one not so weak that it will disintegrate; the reinforcement of the conservative gulf regimes and cheap supplies of oil; the maintenance of a rough balance of power between Iraq and Iran."

Wall Street Journal columnist George Melloan was even more frank. Slaughtering thousands more Iraqis, he argued, would have a very positive impact on American authority not only in the immediate environs of Iraq, but all over the world.

"Hitting Iraq's weapons sites would be a useful warning to other states with ambitions to attain power and prestige by acquiring weapons of mass destruction," he wrote on Tuesday. "What happened to Saddam could happen to you, it would say."

Expanding on the same theme, he wrote: "destroying access to the sites and blowing up the power grids that keep them running ... would certainly be a message to anyone anywhere in the world, who might in future be offered a job making poison gas...."

"US intelligence estimates that 20 nations, including Iran and Syria, are actively developing chemical and biological weapons. At some point, this kind of activity will have to be discouraged. Why not now?"

Such statements expose the purpose of the impending

attack on Iraq, which lies behind the public talk of peace and democracy. American capitalism wants to reassert its unchallenged domination of the Persian Gulf, with its rich oil deposits and its strategic importance for American business and military aims internationally.

To that end the US intends to use Iraq as an example of what happens to any people that emerge as an obstacle to US imperialist interests. Washington wants to give the world an object lesson in the murderous force of its firepower, the better to bully, intimidate and inspire fear.

American militarism poses the danger of far wider conflagrations, which will have catastrophic consequences for the working class all over the world.

To our readers in the Middle East, we say no credence should be given to the Arab bourgeois leaders who shed crocodile tears for the Iraqi people and try to distance themselves from the impending US slaughter. In 1990-91 they supplied the pretext for the American invasion and the sanctions that followed. They remain complicit in the devastation of Iraq.

Even while claiming to stand against a US attack, virtually all of the Arab regimes are quietly providing Washington with support. Egypt has allowed American warships to sail through the Suez Canal, while Saudi Arabia has made it clear it will not stop AWACS command and control planes or refueling tanker planes from taking off from its airfields.

As for workers in the US, they should understand that another war is approaching, and it will have horrific consequences. To this day tens of thousands of Americans who were sent to Kuwait and Iraq in the last war are suffering physical and emotional damage as a result.

The basic force that must be brought forward in opposition to imperialism and militarism is the international working class. It must establish its political independence from the capitalist class and forge its unity in struggle against war and poverty, and the profit system responsible for these scourges.



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