

After the bombing of Iraq, danger grows of a US ground assault

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30 December 1998

Recent clashes between US and British planes and Iraqi air defense units in the so-called 'no-fly zones' in the north and south of the country underscore the highly volatile situation in the Persian Gulf and the entire Middle East in the aftermath of the four-day air war carried out by Washington and London.

Iraq's decision on Monday to fire SAM missiles at US planes patrolling the northern region was a major step by Baghdad. Throughout the four-day air war, the Iraqi regime withheld its SAM missile defenses, using only ineffective anti-aircraft artillery. American network news reports Monday evening quoted unnamed US officials saying they considered a wider war with Iraq inevitable.

The Iraqi regime calculates that the December 16-19 air war was a political and diplomatic failure for the Americans. By announcing it will defy the ban on Iraqi flights over the 'no-fly zones' and treat western air patrols as violations of its air space, it is seeking to widen the divisions within the UN Security Council between the US and Britain on the one side, and France, Russia and China on the other. It is also seeking to pressure the Arab regimes to demand a lifting of the sanctions, appealing to the outrage among the Arab masses over the US-led vendetta.

Iraqi newspapers on Tuesday hailed widespread public protests in Arab capitals against the US-British air strikes and criticized Arab governments for doing little or nothing to oppose the bombing. In a front-page editorial, Iraq's *al-Qadissiya* newspaper warned Arab leaders that ignoring 'the snowballing Arab wrath ... will shake the ground from under their feet.'

The Iraqi press and officials such as Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz have singled out Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Egypt for attack. Aziz denounced Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak as a stooge of the Americans, and said Mubarak only appealed to President Clinton to end the air strikes because he feared the growing wave of popular opposition expressed in street demonstrations in Egypt and elsewhere.

The 'no-fly zones' were imposed by the US, Britain and France in the Kurdish north of Iraq in 1991 and the Shiite south the following year. They were never sanctioned by UN resolutions.

Two weeks after the US and Britain launched their air assault

on Iraq, it is generally recognized that 70 hours of intensive bombing produced questionable results from a military standpoint, while throwing imperialist policy in the Persian Gulf into deeper disarray.

The Pentagon's initial post-bombing assessment that fewer than a third of the 97 Iraqi targets had been severely damaged or destroyed provoked consternation in the American media and political establishment. On December 21 Marine General Anthony Zinni, who commanded the air assault, held a press conference to counter doubts about the military efficacy of the attack. Zinni declared that US and British forces had hit 85 percent of their targets. He further claimed that the bombardment had badly damaged Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard, but he undercut this assertion with the admission that Republican Guard forces had abandoned their barracks and headquarters before the air strikes began.

Whatever its military success, the bombing campaign was a political failure. Its timing, on the eve of the impeachment vote in the House of Representatives, underscored the cynicism of the Clinton administration and further discredited its declared aims of promoting world peace and 'degrading' Saddam Hussein's supposed arsenal of chemical and biological weapons. That the White House sacrificed Iraqi men, women and children in an attempt to conciliate its right-wing Republican opponents was underscored by a report in the December 23 *New York Times* that Republicans on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence sent Clinton a letter just prior to the onset of the air war, criticizing him for vacillating in the US assault on Baghdad.

US hopes that its high-tech missiles would either kill Saddam Hussein or shatter his security forces and undermine his regime were dashed when the Iraqi strongman emerged apparently unscathed and defiant. The circumstances surrounding the assault, moreover, undermined the pretense that Washington was merely carrying out the will of the 'world community.' The US and Britain acted in open defiance of the majority on the UN Security Council. The flagrant collusion between chief weapons inspector Richard Butler and the Clinton administration provided proof of UNSCOM's role as an appendage of the US State Department and the CIA.

The air war intensified the divisions between the major

powers over US policy in the Persian Gulf. Russia and China immediately denounced the bombing campaign. Yeltsin recalled Russia's ambassadors to the US and Britain for several days--something that never occurred during the Cold War--and placed its naval forces on military alert. France called for the lifting of the oil embargo against Iraq, and joined with Russia and China in demanding the sacking of Richard Butler.

Washington's assertion of its right to take unilateral military action to support its global interests has further inflamed international relations. The mounting resentment of many US 'allies' was indicated by Paul Quiles, former French defense minister and current chairman of the French National Assembly's defense committee. Quiles denounced the US for playing 'world policeman' by attacking Iraq without UN approval. He charged that Washington was deliberately weakening the authority of the UN as part of a strategy 'to turn NATO into a military organization with wider aims.'

Pascal Boniface, director of the Institute for International and Strategic Studies in Paris, called for Europe to create a military counterforce to the US. 'If Europe took on strategic autonomy,' he said, 'it could become the superpower of the twenty-first century.'

In the aftermath of the bombing, the contradictions and absurdities of US policy toward Iraq are more glaring than ever. For months American officials, including Clinton, have acknowledged that an air war would mean the end of UNSCOM. Some have hinted that the US would even welcome such an outcome. But UNSCOM has served as the main fig leaf for Washington's policy of aggression. The US has relied on the weapons inspectors' claims of Iraqi noncompliance to justify military confrontation.

At the same time, American support for UNSCOM has provided a cover for its opposition to any easing of economic sanctions. It is not US intransigence, according to the official line, but the unbiased judgment of UNSCOM that determines Washington's attitude toward sanctions.

Now, as the US anticipated, Iraq has refused to permit UNSCOM to resume its operations. But Washington continues to demand the full enforcement of sanctions--responsible for incalculable human misery and death--without providing Iraq with any means for their eventual abolition.

US and British spokesmen are declaring they will enforce the sanctions, with or without UNSCOM, by carrying out further sneak attacks on the Iraqi people. British Prime Minister Tony Blair made a speech after the conclusion of the air assault in which he demanded that the people of the world accept such wanton imperialist violence as the new 'global reality.'

But even the likes of Blair and Clinton know that repeated bombing does not of itself constitute a viable policy. Sooner, rather than later, the sanctions would collapse and countries such as France and Russia would resume economic relations with Iraq. The implications for the political destabilization of bourgeois regimes throughout the Middle East would,

moreover, be incalculable, not to mention the inevitable growth of domestic opposition to such barbaric methods.

Hence the increasingly open turn to a policy of overthrowing the regime in Baghdad. This has long been the demand of the most right-wing and militaristic elements in the American political establishment, and Clinton, consistent with his entire tenure as president, is bending to their will.

In November, after Clinton called off an imminent air attack on Iraq, Henry Kissinger published a column in the *Washington Post* under the headline, 'Bring Saddam Down.' Kissinger demanded that Clinton set about arming and training an Iraqi opposition force, and give them a guarantee that American forces would be sent into Iraq to protect them, if necessary, from Hussein's military.

In the aftermath of this month's bombing campaign, the *Wall Street Journal* wrote with satisfaction that 'the bombings were a reminder of the kind of force only America can project, and its willingness to use it.' But it denounced the Clinton administration for not going far enough, saying America needed a strategy for 'pacifying the Middle East.'

The following day Clinton's national security adviser, Samuel Berger, announced that the White House would invite Iraqi opposition groups to a joint meeting in Washington early in the new year.

The turn to a policy of military-political coup represents a major escalation of US aggression in the Persian Gulf. The unraveling of the previous policy only heightens the element of recklessness within the US political establishment, and moves the world closer to direct US intervention in Iraq.

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