

New US aggression and machinations in the Persian Gulf

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Actions taken by the US government and military over the past week amount to a new round of provocative and reckless behavior in the Persian Gulf region.

On Thursday US and British war planes bombed targets in southern Iraq, killing 14 civilians and injuring 19, according to Iraqi officials. The raids took place near Al Kut, Ar Rumaylah and Al Basrah—95, 225 and 245 miles from Baghdad, respectively. Iraq's Air Defense, as reported by the Iraqi News Agency, claimed that 18 waves of planes carried out 24 bombing missions.

The reported death toll was the worst since an attack last August 17, in which 19 civilians died. According to the Iraqi government, nearly 200 people were killed in American and British air raids last year.

US officials defended the strikes. Defense Secretary William Cohen told troops aboard an aircraft carrier in the region Friday that the bombing raids were “helping to keep Saddam Hussein contained.”

The US Navy is continuing to hold a Russian oil tanker that it seized Wednesday in international waters while it carries out tests to see if the ship's oil comes from Iraq, in violation of UN sanctions. Royal Dutch/Shell Oil Co. has said the oil on board the Akademik Pustovoyt is theirs and was headed from Iran to the Myrina, a Shell-operated ship off Dubai, to be transported to Singapore.

The Russian Foreign Ministry demanded the Akademik be released and called for an independent investigation. The head of Russia's Transportation Ministry, Nikolai Matyushenko, told the press that the ship was stopped only because it was Russian. He said it was the third time the vessel had been searched, and that each time no violations had been found.

The commander of the multinational maritime effort

aimed at enforcing the sanctions, US Vice Admiral Charles Moore, accused Iran Thursday of high-level official involvement in smuggling of Iraqi oil and called for international pressure on Tehran to put an end to it. The oil must be “smuggled” to international markets because of UN sanctions that have cost hundreds of thousands of Iraqis their lives since 1990.

Moore was responding to the seizure last Saturday by Iranian naval forces of a Honduran-registered ship, Al-Masru, allegedly carrying Iraqi oil. Iranian authorities impounded the ship and detained the captain and crew. Moore noted that the action followed a briefing he gave March 23 to the UN Security Council alleging Iranian complicity with the smuggling. The admiral commented, “The Iranians are making an attempt here at a minimum to develop a perception that they in fact are going to cooperate with the UN. But it takes more than one interception. We're going to have to see a pattern change here.”

US officials claim that there has been a fourfold increase in the smuggling of Iraqi oil since last September, a trend apparently stimulated by increased world oil prices. Whether the operation has increased at this rate or not, it is providing the US military with new arguments for stepped-up aggression against Iraq. Moore claimed that the Hussein regime could make as much as \$500 million from smuggling oil, money it could use to rebuild militarily. “This has come upon us like a tsunami,” the admiral told reporters.

The willingness of the Iranian regime to serve as a proxy of US imperialism in helping impose sanctions against Iraq fits into the general pattern of improved relations between Washington and Tehran. While Moore was grudging in his praise of the Al-Masru seizure, US State Department spokesman James P. Rubin declared, “We're pleased to see that Iran is

taking measures against this illegal traffic.”

As part of the apparent ongoing rapprochement, Iran's foreign minister, Kamal Kharrazi, on Wednesday welcomed US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's recent diplomatic overture. In a March 17 speech, in which she announced elimination of a US ban on imports of Iranian luxury goods, Albright called for the need to reverse decades of mistrust. She said that the US wanted a “new relationship” with Iran. Kharrazi stated that the Secretary's comments contained some “positive points.”

During the bloody Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s the US warmed its hands on the flames, while generally favoring Iraq. Today Washington seems bent on once again stirring the pot in the area, while tilted toward Iran. For its part, the Tehran regime is content to trot out anti-American and anti-imperialist rhetoric if this suits its purposes, particularly when billions of dollars in oil money is at issue—for example at the recent OPEC meeting in Vienna—while steadily pursuing a new course in relation to the US.

The Iranians are also apparently intent on creating closer ties to the ultra-reactionary Saudi regime. The two governments stood shoulder to shoulder at the OPEC gathering, and there are other indications of their new intimacy. The Saudi regime expressed support for the Iranian-backed Hezbollah guerrillas in Lebanon after recent Israeli raids and Crown Prince Abdullah, increasingly in charge of the Saudi government, met with a delegation from the guerrilla group—the first official meeting between Hezbollah and a senior Saudi leader. In a surprise move, Iran was also invited to attend a meeting of Arab foreign ministers at which the latest developments in Lebanon were discussed.

Turkey, a US proxy of long standing in the region, has launched a new incursion into Iraqi territory. On Thursday the Hussein regime demanded that Turkish troops, pursuing Kurdish rebels, withdraw from its northern province. Baghdad has had no control over the area since the Gulf War in 1991. Up to 7,000 Turkish soldiers, backed by helicopter gunships, crossed into northern Iraq last Saturday in the first offensive against Kurdish forces of the spring. Some 50,000 troops are gathered on the Turkish-Iraqi border, ready to take part in a large-scale operation, according to Turkish and Kurdish sources.

In a further development, Hans Blix, the new chief

weapons inspector for Iraq, issued a report last week. He outlined plans for a new agency which he claims will not be under any government's thumb. Blix is responding to revelations that the old weapons inspection agency, UNSCOM, was little more than a front for the CIA and other Western intelligence services. He stressed in his report that arms inspectors for UNMOVIC (UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission) will work only for the UN and not for any country's government.

The inspectors “shall neither seek nor receive instructions from any government and member states shall not seek to influence them in the discharge of their responsibilities,” the report said. Blix also indicated that he would not be appointing a deputy, a position traditionally held by an American.

The provocative behavior of the UNSCOM inspectors helped provide the pretext for the bombing of Iraq in December 1998.

Certain high-ranking Iraqi officials have stated that they will not accept new UN weapons inspectors, while others have hinted at a compromise. The failure of the Iraqis to prove the nonexistence of “weapons of mass destruction” or even of any capability to make them—an impossible task—is still advanced by the US and Britain as an argument for keeping the murderous sanctions in place.



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