

US-British air strikes on Baghdad: Bush draws first blood

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In his first foreign policy decision, newly installed President George W. Bush authorized an unprovoked air attack on the outskirts of Baghdad, escalating the ongoing US war against the Persian Gulf country.

Twenty US and four British warplanes, taking off Friday morning (US time) from land bases in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia and the aircraft carrier USS Harry Truman in the Persian Gulf, attacked thirty targets at five separate sites near the Iraqi capital. According to American officials, the sites were radar and command and control installations.

The raid was the first attack on targets outside the so-called “no-fly” zones and the first assault on the Baghdad region since the four-day air war carried out by the US and Britain in December of 1998. Since that time American and British planes have carried out hundreds of strikes against Iraqi targets, civilian as well as military, in the southern and northern no-fly zones that were established by the US and its allies in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War. These zones, which cover most of the land mass of Iraq, were decreed without even the legal fig leaf of United Nations resolutions.

According to Iraq, some 300 Iraqis have been killed and more than 800 injured since the US and Britain began conducting almost daily air strikes in the no-fly zones. Only last Sunday seven people were killed and seventeen houses destroyed in air strikes in the south, and on Tuesday two children were killed and their mother injured in a bomb explosion in the southern province of Kerbala.

These brutal actions are carried out as part of a sanctions policy that has caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis from disease and malnutrition since the end of the Gulf War. To this day American diplomats are holding up billions of dollars of imports

needed for civilian transportation, electric power generation, the oil industry and medical treatment on the grounds that they could potentially be put to military use.

Friday's strikes typified the lopsided and cowardly character of the US persecution of Iraq. The warplanes fired their high-tech missiles from within the southern no-fly zone, more than thirty miles from their targets and well beyond the reach of Iraqi anti-aircraft fire.

Iraqi President Saddam Hussein condemned the attack and said it was part of preparations by the US, in alliance with Israel, to launch a larger assault “against the Arab nations and the Palestinians.” Iraqi TV showed shots of numerous injured civilians and claimed that one woman had died in the bombing raids.

In the hours following the strikes reports surfaced of massive demonstrations by Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip denouncing the US-British aggression. A leading official from the Russian Defense Ministry called the attack “an affront to international security and the world community,” and a French Foreign Ministry spokesman disassociated Paris from the bombings, saying, “We were neither told nor consulted on these raids.”

Bush authorized the air strikes on Thursday, prior to leaving for a one-day meeting in Mexico with newly elected President Vicente Fox. At a press conference at Fox's ranch on Friday, following the raids, Bush said he had authorized the attack, which he characterized as a “routine” implementation of US policy toward Iraq. While denying that the raids marked a shift in US tactics, he issued a thinly veiled warning that further large-scale attacks would come if the regime in Baghdad continued to challenge US war planes patrolling the no-fly zones.

In an example of the “newspeak” that has become the

hallmark of US foreign policy, Bush said, “Our intention is to make sure the world is as peaceful as possible.”

This posture of pacifism by means of long-range, precision-guided missiles was reiterated by Pentagon spokesman Lt. Gen. Gregory Newbold, who told a press conference that the air strikes were a “self-defense measure.”

Newbold's claim is based on the tortured logic that is routinely used to justify Washington's vendetta against a defenseless nation. Starting from the premise that the United States has the right to trample on Iraqi sovereignty and keep the country in a state of constant terror and semi-starvation, Washington concludes that any measures taken by the Iraqi regime to defend itself against US bombers are aggressive actions that threaten the lives of American airmen. Accordingly, recent efforts by Iraq to strengthen its anti-aircraft defenses are portrayed as further evidence of Saddam Hussein's demonic role in the Middle East.

This absurd position is accepted uncritically by virtually the entire political establishment and retailed to the public by the mass media. Democratic Party support for Friday's raids on Baghdad was signaled by Samuel Berger, former national security adviser to former President Clinton, who told CNN, “This is a completely appropriate action. This has been done before.”

The assertion by US officials that Friday's air strikes were “routine” actions, far from indicating a policy of moderation, betokens a more aggressively militaristic posture. A signal is being sent both to Baghdad and to America's recalcitrant allies—in particular France and Russia—that Washington reserves the right, under the cover of enforcing the no-fly zones, to strike any Iraqi targets, at any time and with as much forces as it deems fit, and feels no compunction to consult with fellow members of the UN Security Council, let alone obtain their consent.

Thus Bush's first foreign policy initiative is an announcement of a unilateralist stance more extreme than that exhibited by the Clinton administration.

The aggressive foreign policy significance of the air strikes is underscored by their coming on the eve of next week's tour of the Middle East and the Persian Gulf by Secretary of State Colin Powell. Washington wants to whip the Arab regimes into line behind its

sanctions policy, increasingly unpopular in the region, and reaffirm its position of dominance over the peoples of the Middle East.

Notwithstanding the pacifist phrase-mongering of Bush and the misinformation from the US media, it is impossible to obscure the fact that the current assault on Iraq is being conducted by the very people who presided over the 1991 invasion of the country. Powell, as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was in overall military command, and the new vice president, Richard Cheney, was the secretary of defense. The father of the current president occupied the White House. The real economic and geo-strategic motives that underlie Washington's aggressive policy in the oil-rich region are underscored by the personal and financial ties that link both George Herbert Walker Bush and his son George W., as well as Cheney, to the US oil industry.

The escalation of military action against Iraq has, as well, a definite domestic political significance. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has warned more than once since the Republicans gained control of the White House by fraudulent means, the Bush administration is bound to carry out military adventures overseas, sooner rather than later. A highly unstable government, resting on an extremely narrow base of support and viewed by millions as illegitimate, one, moreover, that is committed to a policy of social reaction under conditions of mounting economic crisis and distress—such a government will inevitably turn to military actions abroad as a means of offsetting its crisis at home.



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