

US and Britain isolated over Baghdad raid

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The US-British air strikes against Baghdad on Friday were widely criticised by governments throughout the world.

Rather than an endorsement of the raid as a necessary show of strength to enforce the sanctions imposed on Iraq since the 1991 Gulf War, the unilateral action by the two countries fuelled international discontent over what is seen as a failed and counter-productive policy.

On the United Nations Security Council, the action was criticised by all permanent members other than the US and the UK. Russia denounced the "unprovoked action", which "runs counter to the UN Charter and other international legal norms and exacerbates the already explosive situation in the Middle East."

Dmitry Rogozin, chairman of the foreign affairs committee of the lower house of the Russian parliament, issued an explicit warning to the European powers regarding the danger posed by the Bush administration's aggressive military policy and its plans to develop a national missile defence system. "Europe should think carefully about what a powerful overseas country can do if it believes it is invulnerable," he said. "Whom will the US bomb then, and for what reason?"

A Chinese UN representative said China opposed "armed intervention by any UN member state under any circumstances against any other nation without the express consent of the Security Council".

The French foreign ministry said, "We have frequently made known our incomprehension and unease over the repeated air strikes carried out by US and British aircraft". Other European countries expressed their concern, including Spain and Germany.

Russia and France, in particular, have clashed with the US and Britain over Iraq with increasing bitterness. The opposition of these countries to the continuation of UN sanctions has far more to do with their own economic and strategic interests in the Gulf than with any principled opposition to Western intervention or

militarism. Both France and Russia backed the Gulf War and the sanctions regime imposed at the beginning of the 1990s, but they have since established links with the Iraqi oil industry which are frustrated by the hard-line policy of Washington and London.

Most Arab regimes condemned the bombing, including key allies of the US during the Gulf war. An Arab League statement said there was "no justification" for the bombing, which "runs counter to UN resolutions and international norms".

America's main Arab ally, Egypt, released a statement Saturday calling the air raids "a serious, negative step that we cannot accept, nor understand its reasons, which run counter to Iraq's safety and sovereignty." Syria, another key player in the Middle East, said the attacks reflected poorly on the new Bush administration.

Perhaps most significantly Turkey, the NATO member from which US and British planes most frequently take off to patrol the no-fly zone in northern Iraq, stressed that its bases had not been used this time and it had not been informed of the attack. Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit said, "It is sad that a need was felt to resort to such an action against Iraq, and that civilians as well as military targets were harmed."

Popular demonstrations took place throughout the Middle East, raising serious political difficulties for the Arab rulers. Opposition to the raid was most vocal amongst the Palestinians.

Arab anger was fuelled by the rank hypocrisy of the Bush and Blair governments in justifying the raids as a necessary step to prevent a despotic regime flouting UN resolutions on weapons inspection. Less than two weeks ago, Ariel Sharon, the architect of the Sabra and Shatilla massacre of Palestinians in 1982, was elected Israeli prime minister on the basis of hostility to UN-brokered peace negotiations and a pledge to intensify Israeli military action on the West Bank and Gaza

Strip. Israel has consistently violated UN resolutions in order to preserve its illegal occupation of the territories seized during the 1967 war.

Last week the Israeli Defence Force killed one of Yasser Arafat's bodyguards, the latest of 20 such assassinations since the Palestinian *intifada* (uprising) began last September. The Israeli Labour and Likud parties united in endorsing the assassination. The US issued only the most perfunctory protest.

It is a fact that the one state in the Middle East that openly uses state terror and assassination as instruments of foreign policy is Israel. Yet the US proclaims Israel to be a bastion of peace and democracy, while it continues to pursue a scorched earth policy toward Iraq. The glaring contradictions in the official rationale for the American-led assault on Iraq underscore the fact that the real motives are bound up with US economic and strategic aims in the oil-rich Gulf.

Israel welcomed the bombing of Baghdad as an indication of US support for its hard-line stance against the Palestinians and a warning to Iraq and other Arab regimes against interfering. On Monday, Israel and the US began five days of joint military exercises involving the launching of Patriot missiles against a simulated attack from Iraqi scud missiles.

In Britain, opposition to the raids was expressed within the ruling Labour Party and was not confined to the usual critics on the party's left, such as Tony Benn, Alice Mahon and Tam Dalyell. Among those who raised concerns about Prime Minister Blair's uncritical support for the action was Clive Soley, chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party, Bill Morris, leader of the Transport and General Workers Union, and Euro-MP Glenys Kinnock, wife of former Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock. The opposition Liberal Democrats also questioned the action.

Government sources made clear that Blair's motivation for lending military support to the US was to provide "a fundamental building block" for British-American relations. Blair is anxious to reinforce the so-called "special relationship" between the two countries following the change to a Republican administration in Washington.

Sections of the media were critical of Blair's political priorities. A layer within the ruling class believes Blair's orientation to the US goes against British interests, and that he should pursue a more pro-

European course.

The *Independent* complained, "The Prime Minister should urgently rethink his unrealistic 'Third Way' in international policy, that somehow seeks to place Britain at the heart of Europe and in a special relationship with the United States. The missile attack on Iraq is opposed by other EU countries, as were the previous military interventions." More stridently, the *Guardian* said that the raids proved Bush was "dangerous". They warned, "Increasingly, this domineering American security agenda does not serve Britain's interests, nor that of Britain's European partners".

There are also, from the standpoint of Britain's business establishment, serious financial considerations arguing against continued support for sanctions on Iraq, which has left Britain trailing behind other European countries that are ignoring the sanctions in order to take advantage of Iraq's lucrative oil trade.



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