

Powell's Middle East tour highlights crisis of US policy

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US Secretary of State Colin Powell's mandate in his tour of the Middle East was to shore-up dwindling international support for America's policy of imposing economic sanctions on Iraq, while avoiding controversy and projecting the semblance of an even-handed approach towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In the end, however, all Powell succeeded in doing was to confirm the crisis of US strategy in the Middle East and the absence of a coherent alternative perspective within the Bush administration.

Powell's visit was timed to coincide with Kuwaiti celebrations of the tenth anniversary of the Gulf War against Iraq. Powell was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff responsible for overseeing the US-led war in 1991, when a broad coalition of support against Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime was put in place encompassing the European powers and the majority of the Arab countries.

A decade later, however, Powell returned to Kuwait as part of a tour including Egypt, Israel, the Palestinian territories, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Syria under conditions where America's policy towards Iraq is opposed by all the major European powers, except Britain; who view sanctions on Iraq as counterproductive both politically and economically and who regularly flout them in order to win a share of the country's massive oil reserves.

The situation is worse amongst the Arab regimes. Economically the isolation of Iraq is detrimental to the entire Middle East and many Arab regimes, most notably Syria. Syria is suspected of pumping 100,000 barrels of Iraqi oil a day through a new pipeline to its Mediterranean coast.

Politically sanctions against Iraq pose a danger to the region's ruling elites, because support for an imperialist inspired embargo meets with widespread opposition amongst the Arab masses. To openly support America under any circumstances is a dangerous gamble. It becomes positively incendiary, however, under today's conditions with a Palestinian intifada raging against the US's historic ally, Israel.

The uprising on the West Bank and Gaza Strip against Israeli brutality, coupled with the election of the notorious war criminal Ariel Sharon as Israel's prime minister has placed enormous pressure on Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, Jordan's King

Abdullah and other stalwart US allies to support the lifting of sanctions against Iraq and take a united stand against Israel and its main economic and political backer.

The Bush administration had already been placed on the defensive prior to Powell's departure, when America's unilateral decision to bomb areas around Iraq's capital, Baghdad, on February 16 had been condemned by most of Europe, Russia, China and the Arab states. Only Britain and Canada dissented. Powell was therefore forced to spend the majority of his four-day tour arguing that a new program of "smart sanctions" specifically targeting Hussein's ruling clique could be implemented to replace what Bush acknowledged was a policy so regularly flouted that he likened it to "Swiss cheese". But even with these concessions, Powell was hardly given what could be described as a warm reception. For the as yet unspecified policy change he mooted was still predicated on an attempt to portray Iraq as the greatest threat to Middle Eastern stability, with warnings by Bush against Saddam Hussein not to "cross any line" and "test our will" and Powell adding that "We have to make sure that we do everything we can to contain him".

Egypt's foreign minister, Amr Moussa, responded to Powell's entreaties by declaring, "For us, I don't see that threat."

The difficulties facing the US are compounded by clear disagreements within the Bush regime itself over Middle East policy. Powell is viewed in some Republican quarters as a conciliator, who took an equivocal position over Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and argued that the US should only send troops under conditions of Hussein having invaded Saudi Arabia.

One of his most severe critics at the time, Vice President Dick Cheney, who was Defense Secretary under Bush's father, together with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz is calling for Hussein's regime to be overthrown through the US providing aid to Iraqi opposition groups. Powell appears to remain skeptical of the efficacy of such initiatives, given the volatility of the Middle East situation and the lack of any support within Europe. Even British Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon went on record as opposing US defense advisor Richard Perle's statement that "The Bush administration recognises removing Saddam is the only way to solve the problem. I fully expect the

UK will support and be part of it." In response Hoon told ITV's Jonathan Dimbleby, "Regime change has not been UK policy so far. We'd never argue the objective of our policy should be the removal of Saddam as such."

The two most important stopovers on Powell's tour—in Israel and Kuwait—epitomised the current stalemate in US policy. In Israel, Powell met with Sharon before traveling in an armoured convoy to the Palestinian territories to meet with Yasser Arafat.

The Bush administration has already acknowledged Sharon's position that the proposals drawn up by the Clinton administration to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are null-and-void. Thus Powell described the prospects of peace as being "a long way off" stating, "the best we can hope for in the short term is a reduction in the level of violence." Sharon also drew comfort from Powell's emphasis on the danger posed by Iraq, as well as Powell's fulsome praise for him as "very reflective, very thoughtful, very engaged".

There were clear indications of concern within the US that Sharon's bellicose stance could plunge the Middle East into a full-scale war. He urged the Israeli government to look towards ending the economic siege imposed on the Palestinian Authority (PA), "as soon as possible so that economic activity can begin again in the region." But he made no statement stronger than this and did not raise Israel's refusal to release \$57 million in tax revenues to the Palestinian territories, because he understood that Sharon would not act in a "rising spiral of violence."

Sharon immediately interpreted the statement as an endorsement of his refusal to conduct negotiations, demanding, "The Palestinian Authority must take immediate action to stop terror and violence. I will conduct negotiations with the Palestinian Authority following the cessation of hostilities."

Under these conditions, Powell's subsequent visit to Kuwait on Monday amounted to an open provocation. He took his place alongside former US President George Bush and former British Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and John Major in affirming the continued military alliance between the US and Kuwait. The former heads of state met during a joint US-Kuwaiti military exercise involving the deploying and firing of Patriot missiles against an Iraqi invasion force. Fighter jets, tanks, rockets and high explosive devices were employed in a mock battle with Iraqi tanks.

About 4,500 US troops are based in Kuwait, together with squadrons of US and British warplanes that regularly patrol southern Iraq. Iraq's deputy information minister, Hamid Said, stated that the manoeuvres, "marked an escalation against Iraq because of its support for the intifada", warning that "such an escalation threatens an explosion".

A decade ago, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait provided the US with a necessary pretext for implementing longstanding plans to intervene militarily in the Persian Gulf and seize control of its vast oil reserves. Ever since it has maintained between 17-24,000 troops in the region as a permanent military garrison.

At that time, the US was able to secure the cooperation of the other major powers through a combination of blackmail employing its acknowledged role as the world's sole remaining superpower and through an appeal to their self-interest. Europe hoped that support for America's ambitions in the Middle East would also enable them to give free rein to their own colonialist ambitions.

The majority of the Arab regimes abandoned any pretense of anti-imperialist policy and belief in Arab unity and revealed themselves as US stooges whose sole concern was to preserve their ability to preside over the exploitation of the region's oil resources by the global oil giants.

In the war's aftermath, it seemed as if the US was at liberty to dictate political developments in the Middle East to suit its requirements. The prostration of the Arab bourgeois leaders found its consummate expression in Arafat and the PLO's acceptance in 1993 of the US terms for a settlement with Israel based on the creation of a truncated Palestinian state on parts of the West Bank and Gaza.

But the US could not simply utilise its military and economic might to impose a pax-Americana on the Middle East. The region is more unstable today than at any time in recent history. There is no agreement on Gulf policy between the US, Europe and Japan because they are engaged in a covert war over who will control the lion's share of its resources.

The Oslo Accord has broken down in the face of the refusal of the right wing of the Zionist bourgeoisie to accept even the limited compromise with the Palestinians the Accord envisioned. Moreover the intolerable situation in which Arafat placed his people has largely discredited his leadership and created the conditions where the PA regime has been unable to stem the present outburst of popular opposition to the Israeli occupation forces. The standing of the other Arab rulers in the eyes of the workers and peasants is even worse.

With the regimes through which the US has exercised its hegemony over the Middle East so discredited, Arab and Israeli alike, the Bush administration must confront social and political tensions that are all the greater for having taken a decade to mature and for which, in the final analysis, it has no answer other than further acts of military aggression.



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