

Problems escalate for Bush in Middle East

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Efforts are being made to dampen expectations of a sustained military offensive against Afghanistan of the type that had previously been indicated by leading Republicans and military spokesmen. US Secretary of State Colin Powell said there would be no campaign like Operation Desert Storm against Iraq and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld stressed, "There is not going to be a D-Day as such".

One of the key factors influencing this change of tack are fears within the Bush administration over the possible impact its military plans could have on political and social relations in the Middle East. Washington has succeeded in winning the backing of some of the Gulf states for an offensive against Afghanistan, but most of the Arab regimes have indicated only a willingness to sanction a more carefully targeted offensive against the Al-Qaeda network of Osama Bin Laden. In the case of Iran, moreover, it appears that opposition to support for the US amongst hardline clerics has won the day against the more placatory noises coming initially from President Khatami.

Concern has grown within the Bush administration that any precipitate action could deepen the political isolation of friendly Arab leaders and possibly destabilise the entire Middle East.

Rumsfeld, alongside such figures as Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Vice President Dick Cheney, had been pushing for a military offensive against both Afghanistan and Iraq. Richard Perle, assistant Defense Secretary in the Reagan administration and now a consultant to the Pentagon, was quoted as saying that no campaign against terrorism could succeed while Saddam Hussein remained in power. He asked, "If the price you pay for a coalition is that you can't fight the war, what's the point of the coalition?" In opposition, the State Department under Powell is said to have been arguing for less spectacular measures against bin Laden's Al-Qaeda network, and is opposed to launching measures against Iraq that would create impossible difficulties for America's Arab allies. Even prior to his most recent statement, Rumsfeld was forced to deny there was a rift between the State Department and his own Department of Defense, insisting they were "all on the same sheet of music".

But Rumsfeld's latest utterances do not mean that the Bush administration has permanently abandoned plans for a military assault against Afghanistan and/or Iraq. One anonymous US government spokesman was quoted this week insisting, "Iraq's day will come." Washington has had far greater success in its efforts to win support from Afghanistan's former Soviet neighbours. It now has permission to use Uzbekistan and Tajikistan airspace, and has stationed more than 1,000 US airborne troops in these countries. Moreover, Russian President Vladimir Putin has made clear his own support for a campaign against the Taliban regime in Kabul.

But the fact that it was felt necessary to tone down the war-rhetoric indicates the tremendous difficulties already facing the US bourgeoisie as a result of the Republican administration's combination of naked militarism and political recklessness.

On September 23, the six oil-rich Gulf Cooperation Council nations—Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar—issued a joint statement promising "total support and

cooperation" for the effort to find and punish those responsible for the suicide attacks in New York and Washington. Two days later, Saudi Arabia cut off diplomatic ties with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. In a statement, Saudi Arabia said the Taliban "used its territory to attract young and inexperienced men from all nationalities, especially from Saudi Arabia, to carry out criminal acts that violate all religions and refused to hand over these criminals to justice".

The United Arab Emirates has also severed ties with Kabul.

The Gulf Cooperation Council includes nearly all of the Arab regimes considered most friendly towards the US—aside from Egypt and the Yemen. But even they feel constrained as to how far they can be seen to side with the US, given the degree of hostility towards America and its support for Israel's brutal suppression of the Palestinians. The Gulf Cooperation Council statement contained no concrete proposals to aid the US campaign. It was careful to link its support for the US to a call for action against Israeli terror acts against the Palestinians and protested efforts to link the "heinous acts" perpetrated against the United States with Islam.

Despite intense US pressure, the Saudi government has still not agreed to allow its bases to be used to mount operations against Afghanistan. The Pentagon had previously announced that it would use Saudi Arabia as a headquarters for air operations against Afghanistan. It had even dispatched Lt. General Charles F. Wald, head of air operations for US Central Command, to set up his command post at the Prince Sultan Air Base at Al Kharj, about 70 miles outside Riyadh. But on September 23, Saudi Arabia expressly forbade US bombers to take off for retaliatory strikes from the Prince Sultan base, stating, "Saudi Arabia will not accept any infringement of its national sovereignty".

This was in no small part a tacit acknowledgement of the support for bin Laden among the Saudi people. Indeed the political career of Osama bin Laden, the son of the founder of the giant Saudi bin Laden construction corporation, was bound up with denunciations of the Saudi royal family for allowing 550,000 US forces to be stationed in Islam's holy land after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Saudi Arabia served as the main staging post for US forces throughout the Gulf War. Since 1991, US military personnel have been permanently stationed in the sheikdom. The Saudi government admits to having 5,000 US troops on its territory, but the actual number is believed to be as high as 25,000. The official justification given is the need for a Saudi base for USAF aircraft patrolling the no-fly zone in Iraq, but the American troop presence also fulfils the domestic function of buttressing the Saudi royal family in case of an uprising against its rule.

Because of popular opposition to their presence, US planes based in Saudi are prohibited from striking Iraqi targets. The Pentagon was proposing to strip the Saudi royal family of even this fig leaf and directly involve them in a war against a Muslim country.

Saudi Arabia, effectively led by Crown Prince Abdullah since his brother King Fahd's stroke in 1995, is dependent on the US militarily and has extensive economic relations with it. But broad layers of their more impoverished citizens, many of whom are immigrant workers, do not share the ruling dynasty's support for the US. In this obscenely unequal

country, the anti-imperialist and anti-American rhetoric employed by the Islamic fundamentalists finds an audience amongst young disaffected Saudis, and up to 25,000 veterans of the Mujahadeens' war against the Soviet army in Afghanistan came from Saudi Arabia.

Deeply sensitive to the simmering opposition to Israel's brutal war against the Palestinians and any attempt by the US to expand its list of targets to include Arab countries, one Saudi official pledged, "we will not agree under any circumstances on hitting sister countries such as Syria, or groups resisting occupation such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah".

The situation facing Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak is equally precarious, as his economic reforms cause ever-greater social misery. Long America's key Arab ally, he has repeatedly warned of a hostile reaction to any US bombardment of Afghanistan. He told CNN's *Larry King Live* that Egypt would prefer to see a United Nations conference convened to agree on an anti-terrorism convention, and for non-US commando-type units "to go in and kill the snake's head." American forces, he added, "would be seen in the Muslim world as evidence supporting the worst paranoid suspicions of the fundamentalist extremists. Some countries are much better suited than the US for such operations."

Mubarak warned of widespread opposition to the US amongst Muslims, who, "everywhere see America giving arms to the Israelis to kill Muslims... Public opinion is seething against an America which continues to support Israel irrespective of [Prime Minister Ariel] Sharon's policies that are designed to prevent the Palestinians from having their own state." In ominous tones he warned, "Go to all the so-called moderate states in the region, from Jordan to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman. Their leaders have told me that their streets are on the verge of boiling over."

Mubarak came to power in 1981 following the assassination of Anwar Sadat by Islamic Jihad, a group that has not been active on Egyptian soil for some years but is said to be linked to bin Laden's Al-Qaeda network. Egypt's largest Islamic group, the opposition Muslim Brotherhood, espouses non-violence but it opposes Egypt's ties to the US. The organisation condemned the terrorist attack on the US, but said it also "condemns any aggression against Islam or Muslims." Only last month, Mubarak faced demonstrators brandishing the Koran and holding banners proclaiming, "Al Aqsa is captive"—referring to the Islamic holy place in Jerusalem, also known to the Jewish people as Temple Mount. The demonstration also contained thousands of graduates demanding jobs.

Jordan's King Abdullah has pledged support for the US, reversing his father King Hussein's refusal to join the US-led coalition against Iraq in 1991. Jordan's minister of information, Salah al Kallab, declared, "Jordan stands with the United States, and we will stand with them even with military confrontation against terrorism." Should Jordan's rulers be asked to act upon this declaration, however, they would arouse massive opposition in a country with a majority Palestinian population. Furthermore, clerics and religious scholars in Jordan, normally one of the most pro-western Arab countries, have said that joining US-led "aggression" against "any Muslim country" is religiously forbidden, treason to God, his prophet and the faithful".

If the prospect of an attack levelled against the Taliban raises such deep concerns amongst the Arab bourgeoisie, this pales before those aroused by threats against Iraq. Amr Moussa, secretary general of the influential 22-nation Arab League, warned the US last week that any strikes against Iraq would "topple the balance of power" in the Middle East.

The serious difficulties facing the US government were epitomised by the humiliating failure of this week's visit to Tehran by British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, who was sent to convince the Iranian government to sign up to the US anti-terror coalition and back a campaign against the Taliban government in Afghanistan.

However, Straw's diplomatic initiative ended as a fiasco. Iranian

Foreign Minister Dr Kamal Kharrazi refused to back US war plans, warning, "A rash, hasty action will lead in the long run to insoluble problems. We must avoid ways that cause catastrophe." He also attacked Israel, stating, "We should not allow the racist, Zionist regime to exploit this present situation and continue the killings of Palestinians."

Straw tried to square the circle by acknowledging differences between Iran and Britain on such descriptions of Israel, but stressing "absolute agreement between us as to our joint horror... against the atrocities committed against thousands of American people, but also well over 1,000 people of the Muslim faith". Despite his verbal gyrations, Straw then fell victim to a political counter-offensive by the Israeli government, which seized on comments written for Straw by the Foreign Office and published in an Iranian newspaper. The article noted that, "One of the factors which helps breed terrorism is the anger which many people in this region feel at events over the years in Palestine." Israel denounced Straw for implying that it was to blame for the September 11 attacks and for using the term "Palestine", with its implication of statehood, and announced that a planned meeting between Straw and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon would not take place.

Straw was not prepared to face down Israel's crude politicking. Instead, Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair made a 15-minute phone-call to Sharon, apologising profusely for any unintentional offence. Sharon eventually agreed to meet briefly with a humbled Straw, but only after an official dinner had been cancelled. Rubbing further salt in the wounds, Sharon kept Straw waiting 15 minutes outside his office before receiving him.

Straw's visit to Iran was followed by a top-level delegation from the European Union. This included foreign policy supremo Javier Solana, European Union External Relations Commissioner Chris Patten and the foreign ministers of Belgium and Spain. The EU party was undertaking a tour of six Asian and Middle Eastern countries aimed at consolidating Islamic support for the US coalition.

However, they were no more successful than Straw. The next day, Iran's religious leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, gave a televised speech proclaiming, "Iran will provide no help to America and its allies in its attack on suffering Muslim Afghanistan," adding that "America has its hands deep in blood for all the crimes committed by the Zionist regime."

Such rhetoric aside, after the Gulf War no one should underestimate the willingness of the Arab bourgeoisie to accommodate itself to US diktats. But the Arab bourgeoisie are well aware that every step they take in this direction creates the conditions for an explosion of political opposition throughout the region. Although many Arab workers and peasants undoubtedly feel great sympathy for the thousands of ordinary Americans who have suffered as a result of the September 11 attacks, they will not be prepared to forgive and forget either the crimes committed by the US government in the Middle East, or those committed by their own governments on Washington's behalf.



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