

US moves closer to war against Iraq

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Last week's visit to Turkey by US Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz marks another step towards full-scale American military action against Iraq. Wolfowitz is the Bush administration policymaker most closely identified with plans for war with the oil-rich Persian Gulf country. The purpose of his trip was to hold top-level talks with the regime whose cooperation is most vital to such an attack.

A US onslaught against Iraq would be one of the great crimes in the history of American imperialism, rivaling only the bloody wars in Korea and Vietnam. Internal Pentagon studies have already predicted tens of thousands of civilian casualties in the event of a US invasion. If fighting extends to the streets of Baghdad—or if the Bush administration acts on its hints of earlier this year, and uses tactical or strategic nuclear weapons—the death toll would rise immeasurably.

Despite the claims that the purpose of a war against Iraq is to overthrow Saddam Hussein and establish democracy in Iraq, the Bush administration—itsself the product of an anti-democratic coup in the 2000 elections—has no intention of installing a popular regime in Baghdad. Instead, its goal is the seizure of Iraq's huge oil reserves and the establishment of unchallenged US strategic dominance in the two most important oil-producing regions of the world, the Persian Gulf and Central Asia.

The real aims of Washington in the region were spelled out in the *Times of London* in an article July 11, headlined, "West sees glittering prizes ahead in giant oilfields."

"The removal of President Saddam Hussein would open Iraq's rich new oilfields to Western bidders and bring the prospect of lessening dependence on Saudi oil," the newspaper said. "No other country offers such untapped oilfields..."

Iraq's proven reserves of 112 billion barrels are second only to Saudi Arabia's 256 billion barrels. The oil riches could be even greater, since unproven reserves may run as high as 220 billion barrels, especially in the three huge oilfields in the south of Iraq—Majnoon, West Qurna and Nahr Umar—each as large as the total oil resources of Kuwait. As one industry expert told the British newspaper, "There is nothing like it anywhere else in the world. It's the big prize."

There is a second, equally powerful motive behind the US drive to war against Iraq. It is increasingly seen by sections of the ruling elite as the only way out of the deepening financial and social crisis within the United States. While news accounts

in the American media spread complacency about the timing of such a war, suggesting that no action is likely until this winter or early in 2003, the crumbling political standing of the Bush administration could produce a military assault before the November elections.

Under conditions of meltdown in the stock market and incessant reports of corporate criminality, some of them linked to Bush and Cheney personally, as well as members of their cabinet, the White House may well decide that the only alternative to a rout for the Republican Party is a spectacular military adventure. This could involve anything from massive bombing of Iraq, to a raid on Baghdad aimed at killing Saddam Hussein and decapitating his regime, to a full-scale invasion.

The Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*, citing high-level sources in the French government, said that an attack on Iraq could take place as early as August. US media reports about the delays in deploying American troops and the obstacles in obtaining support for governments in the region were intended as "disinformation to achieve tactical surprise with regard to the timing, place and method of the assault," the newspaper said. "Paris won't be surprised if the blow comes in the middle of August, while Bush is seen vacationing at his Texas ranch, in the form of a special forces raid backed by the CIA and precision air attacks."

According to Pentagon reports leaked to the American media, the military brass has concluded that a war against Iraq can be waged successfully from Turkey and the small Persian Gulf states of Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain, without using the network of bases in Saudi Arabia which were built up during the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War.

The three small Gulf sheikdoms have become little more than extensions of the American military infrastructure in the region. Last month Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld visited the three states, while not stopping off in Saudi Arabia, an omission whose significance was not lost on the regimes throughout the region.

Kuwait is home to Camp Doha, an American base only 35 miles from the Iraqi border, site of the forward headquarters of the US Central Command. Some 2,000 army troops, equipped with Abrams tanks, Bradley fighting vehicles and Patriot air-defense missiles are at Camp Doha, part of an 8,000-strong contingent of army, air force and navy servicemen that dwarfs in size and fighting power the armed forces of the Kuwaiti

emir.

Qatar is the site of Al Udeid air base, a huge facility that is already home to thousands of American airmen who operate F-16 fighters, JSTAR reconnaissance aircraft and KC-10 and KC-135 aerial tankers. Al Udeid is being fitted out as the main command and control center for US air operations in the region. It would replace Prince Sultan air base in Saudi Arabia, which served that purpose in the 1991 war but is now hampered by restrictions placed on its use by the Saudi monarchy.

The island sheikdom of Bahrain is the principal naval base of the US in the Persian Gulf, with 4,225 sailors and marines stationed there. The naval headquarters for the US Central Command was shifted there last December after completion of the first stage of military operations in Afghanistan, marked by the overthrow of the Taliban.

One possible military scenario for a US war against Iraq, spelled out in documents leaked to the *New York Times* and published July 5, would involve a three-pronged attack from the Persian Gulf on the south, from Jordan on the west, and from Turkey on the north.

A Jordanian role would represent a sharp change from 1991. The Pentagon has several top-priority construction projects under way in Jordan, including lengthening runways at two Jordanian air bases to accommodate larger planes. Last month General Tommy Franks, commander of CentCom, visited Jordan and held talks with King Abdullah and his senior military commanders.

Wolfowitz's trip to Turkey was aimed at firming up support for a US war against Iraq in the country which is the most important staging area for such an assault. The US air base at Incirlik is key to aerial operations in the northern half of the country, and Turkish ports and land transport would be required to conduct ground operations in the oil-rich region around Kirkuk.

While Turkish officials, including Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit, reiterated their posture of opposition to a unilateral American attack on Iraq, their real goal was to extract the best possible price from Washington for their collaboration, both financially and in terms of postwar arrangements in the event of an expected American occupation of Baghdad.

The Turkish regime is primarily concerned that no independent Kurdish regime emerge in northern Iraq, which could become a pole of attraction for the large and cruelly oppressed Kurdish minority in southeastern Turkey. Wolfowitz addressed this issue within hours of his arrival, declaring in a speech in Istanbul that the US government opposes any independent Kurdish state.

According to one report, Turkish officials pressed Wolfowitz for a commitment that after a US-led war against Iraq, the Kurds will not be left in control of Kirkuk and Mosul, the two main centers of oil production in northern Iraq. Control of these oilfields would represent a powerful economic basis for a Kurdish state—or a lucrative prize for Turkey to reward it for

support for or participation in the war.

There are even more crass concerns in Ankara. As the *New York Times* noted July 18 in its report on the Wolfowitz visit: "Turkey wants the United States to write off more than \$4 billion in debt, but government officials said today that they were not naming a price for their support of military action to topple President Saddam Hussein of Iraq."

Except for the case of Turkey, the Bush administration is making little pretense of consultation with the various sheiks and kings who act as its stooges in the region. As the *Times* noted in its account of the latest Pentagon scenario, "None of the countries identified in the document as possible staging areas have been formally consulted about playing such a role..."

The *Times* claimed this underscored "the preliminary nature of the planning." It would be more accurate to say that it demonstrates the disregard of the Bush administration for the national sovereignty and rights of the peoples of the region.

The US war plans provide for a significant role for only one ally: the former imperial ruler of the Persian Gulf, Great Britain. Press reports in London July 19 said that Prime Minister Tony Blair is preparing for a call-up of military reserves and has withdrawn an armored division from training exercises so that it could be deployed to the region if required. British ships and warplanes operate from bases in Oman, Bahrain and Turkey.

US officials have concluded that there cannot even be the pretense of Iraqi participation in the intervention, on the model of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, because the rival factions of the Iraqi bourgeois opposition have neither popular support nor military forces at their disposal. Prior to his trip to Turkey, Wolfowitz met with representatives of the Iraqi National Council, the main opposition umbrella group, and heard what was described as a "bleak report" on the "chaotic state of opposition forces in Iraq" (*New York Times*, July 5).

The Bush administration is only looking for a suitable pretext for war, whether in a breakdown of ongoing talks over reentry of UN weapons inspectors, or a staged incident involving American and British warplanes that continuously patrol the US-declared "no-fly" zones in northern and southern Iraq. The pace of the ongoing bombing attacks, allegedly in retaliation for Iraqi anti-aircraft fire, has been stepped up. While only two large-scale raids took place in the first five months of 2002, on February 28 and April 19, there have been six days of bombing since the middle of June.



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