

Behind the official debate, US builds up forces for attack on Iraq

Patrick Martin
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While a highly publicized debate continues in the pages of the American press on the subject of when and how—rather than whether—to launch a war with Iraq, the US military is pushing ahead with the logistical and technical preparations for the invasion and occupation of the Middle East country.

The White House and Pentagon repeatedly claim that no final decision has been taken on launching a war to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein. But the practical measures being carried out belie this, suggesting that war with Iraq is only a matter of time.

More than 100,000 American and British troops are already on station in the region immediately surrounding the country. Significantly, according to several American press accounts, that is well above the minimum number of troops required under the most recent scenario for an invasion of Iraq proposed by General Tommy Franks, commander of the US Central Command.

Franks reportedly briefed President Bush in the White House in early August on plans to attack Iraq with 50,000 to 80,000 troops, a force that could be made ready for operations in only two weeks, instead of the worst-case invasion scenario, requiring 250,000 troops and a three-month buildup, which CentCom originally proposed last May.

Many of the US deployments are new, and publicly explained by Washington as measures being taken in the ongoing “war on terrorism.” However, the largest groups of American and British troops are in position to attack Iraq, not Al Qaeda. These include 37,000 US troops in the Persian Gulf states—up 12,000 since March—and 27,000 British troops in the same area—up 7,000 over that time. The most rapid US buildup is in Turkey, with the US force swelling from 7,000 to 25,000 by the end of July. Some 6,400 US troops are in Jordan, with 4,000 arriving in the past week for joint exercises with the Jordanian army.

A diagram of the location of American military forces in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Horn of Africa looks increasingly like a noose around Baghdad. US soldiers, sailors and airmen are now stationed in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Yemen, Eritrea and Kenya, with naval forces offshore in the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean.

US-initiated air strikes on Iraqi positions are continuing. US and British jet fighters bombed targets in southern Iraq August 17, the second raid of the week and the twenty-seventh conducted this year in the two “no-fly” zones, in northern and southern Iraq, which were imposed by the US and Britain in 1991 without UN sanction. The Iraqi Air Force Command said the warplanes struck public buildings and civilian homes in Dhi-Qar province, 250 miles south of Baghdad.

Some US Special Forces troops are already engaged in military operations on Iraqi territory. US commandos entered the Kurdish region of northern Iraq near the end of March to begin training Kurdish militias in preparation for the upcoming war, with Turkish special forces moved into areas with a large Turkmen population, near the oil cities of Mosul and Kirkuk. American and Turkish construction engineers entered the region in June to begin work on lengthening air strips to receive advanced warplanes.

According to an Israeli-based news service, Debka.com, an August 6 strike by US and British bombers targeted the Iraqi command and control center at al-Nukhaib in the desert between central Iraq and the Saudi border, making use for the first time of precision-guided bombs which home in and destroy fiber-optic systems. The same day, waves of US warplanes buzzed the Iraqi capital in a show of force, to demonstrate that the radar system protecting

Baghdad was unusable in time of war.

On August 8, according to reports in the Turkish press, US, British and Turkish jets escorted helicopters which carried Turkish commandos to seize the airport at Bamerni in northern Iraq, about 50 miles north of Mosul. US special forces accompanied the Turkish force, which seized the airport after a short battle in which the Iraqi defenders were slaughtered. The occupation of Bamerni gives the US-Turkish forces the ability to strike at will at the Syrian-Iraqi railroad, a key supply link for Baghdad.

The *New York Times* reported August 19 that the US Air Force is stockpiling weapons, ammunition and spare parts throughout the Persian Gulf region and that stocks of precision-guided weapons heavily used in Afghanistan, both bombs and missiles, should be replenished by the fall.

The amount of US war materiel already in place in Kuwait and Qatar is the equivalent of two armored brigades. According to a spokesman for CentCom, this includes about 230 M1A1 Abrams tanks, 120 M2A2 Bradley fighting vehicles, 200 armored personnel carriers, 50 mortars and 40 155-millimeter howitzers, as well as ammunition and 30 days' supply of food and fuel. The 9,000 troops who would operate the equipment could be flown to the region in 96 hours. Equipment for another two armored brigades is on board ships in the Gulf.

The Navy recently signed contracts for 10 huge cargo ships to move tanks and other heavy equipment to the region for use in a ground war against Iraq. Two fast roll-on, roll-off ships were chartered to carry equipment to an unidentified port in the Red Sea, likely in Saudi Arabia. The Scandinavian shipper Maersk was hired to supply eight more roll-on, roll-off ships, with the contract specifying that these vessels would "carry US Army cargo such as ammunition and vehicles such as M1A1 tanks" and take them to "pre-positioning sites" off the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia. The ships will stand by there, awaiting orders to move their cargo to the war zone.

In mid-August the Pentagon completed its largest ever command-and-control exercise, a three-week war game, costing some \$250 million, to simulate a US invasion of an unspecified enemy nation in the Persian Gulf (a combination of Iran and Iraq, according to press accounts). The exercise, called Millennium Challenge 2002, involved 13,500 military and civilian personnel operating in nine live-fire zones in the United States and more than a dozen computer simulations.

According to press accounts of the exercise, the US

forces suffered significant losses because they sailed into the Persian Gulf without initiating fire, allowing the enemy to attack first. When the attack came, the commanders of "Red," (Iran/Iraq) achieved tactical surprise. Some press accounts focused on this aspect of the drill, highlighting the risk of large US casualties. But they were silent on the likely conclusion to be drawn by Pentagon planners: that it is better to launch a war in the narrow confines of the Gulf with a surprise attack by the United States.

There is other, more indirect, evidence that an American war on Iraq is already well beyond the stage of planning for hypothetical cases. US oil companies have sharply reduced their imports of Iraqi oil over the past five months, in response to the increasingly bellicose language coming from Washington. US imports have plunged from about 1 million barrels a day last March to between 100,000 and 200,000 barrels a day. Iraq supplied 8 percent of total US oil imports in 2001.

Press accounts cited a pricing dispute between the US oil companies and the Iraqi government, but the *Washington Post* commented that the withdrawal from the Gulf "may also signal a desire to locate alternative sources of crude in the event of US military action in the region."

The US State Department has asked private aid organizations to bid for millions of dollars in government funds to carry out relief work in Iraq, a country currently under US blockade where American-financed charities are largely barred. As one humanitarian aid group official told the press, "It just seems odd that one part of the government is willing to put \$6.6 million into a territory controlled by our sworn enemy, while another part of the government has major plans to depose that enemy." The obvious inference is that the contract is for work to be performed after a US invasion, or perhaps in territory controlled by US-allied groups such as the Kurdish forces in northern Iraq.



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