

US, UK warplanes bomb civilian airport in Iraq

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US and British warplanes carried out successive bombing raids against Iraqi targets on Wednesday and Thursday, inflicting substantial damage to the main civilian airport in southern Iraq's port city of Basra.

The air raids are the most visible element in a military buildup for an invasion of Iraq that is accelerating even as the Bush administration goes through the motions of pressing for resolutions in the United Nations and the US Congress authorizing military action.

Iraqi government spokesmen reported that the latest bombings destroyed the main radar installations at the airport and destroyed much of the main terminal. At least one civilian was wounded in the bombing raids, according to these reports.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld confirmed the attacks on Thursday, while mocking Iraqi reports of civilian casualties. Rumsfeld recently ordered a shift in the US rules of engagement in the so-called "no-fly zones" that Washington—without UN sanction—declared over northern and southern Iraq. Instead of striking against surface-to-air missiles and other mobile targets as in the past, pilots, under the pretext of responding to Iraqi anti-aircraft fire, have been ordered to bomb buildings, particularly the Iraqi military's command-and-control centers.

Iraq's Foreign Minister Naji Sabri protested the latest attacks. While the US is seeking authorization for military action based on Iraq's supposed violation of UN Security Council resolutions enacted following the last Persian Gulf war, Sabri pointed out that Washington's current bombing campaign is just such a breach of UN mandates. US warplanes, he said, have carried out 859 sorties from bases in Kuwait since mid-August, flying into airspace over the demilitarized zone separating the oil-rich Gulf sheikdom from Iraq.

The aim of these attacks is two-fold: to destroy Iraq's air defense capabilities in these areas and thereby create a safe corridor for US bombers to begin an air war as a prelude to an invasion, and to demolish the ability of the Iraqi regime to communicate with its forces in the field.

Pentagon plans for an invasion of Iraq were submitted to the Bush White House earlier this month, with sections of the military's recommendations leaked to the media. While alternative plans for an invasion were presented, all of the

Pentagon's scenarios call for a massive and protracted aerial bombardment before ground forces are sent in.

Virtually the entire US fleet of B-2 bombers would participate in this air war. These radar-evading stealth aircraft are each armed with sixteen 2,000-pound high-explosive bombs. Washington has sought permission from London to base a substantial number of the planes on the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia, enabling them to fly repeated raids against Baghdad and other cities.

The B-2s will be followed by cruise missile attacks from US warships in the Persian Gulf and Red Sea, as well as B-52 bombers deployed in the region.

Bush administration officials have claimed that the US air war will be aimed at "regime targets"—military facilities, government buildings, presidential palaces, etc.—and not the Iraqi people. But these targets are located largely in heavily populated areas of Baghdad, a city of four million people.

Pentagon planners have projected the civilian death toll reaching the tens of thousands. The scope of the planned initial air attack, a virtual saturation bombing of Iraqi cities, suggests that these estimates may prove quite conservative.

"The start of a new Iraq air campaign is likely to be far more intense than either the bombing of Yugoslavia (1999) or the opening salvo of the Gulf War (1991), which introduced the world to cruise missiles and other precision munitions," the *Washington Post* reported earlier this week. "Air Force officials say an attack on Iraq likely would begin with hundreds of bombers, cruise missiles and fighter aircraft executing a series of air strikes with a barrage of firepower only hinted at in other recent US air campaigns."

The Bush administration is preparing to inflict upon the Iraqi people the kind of wholesale annihilation carried out in the firebombing of Dresden or the atomic bomb attacks on Nagasaki and Hiroshima during the Second World War.

Targeted for complete destruction is Tikrit, the hometown of Saddam Hussein and other leading members of the Iraqi regime. Located about 100 miles north of Baghdad on the Tigris River, this city of 50,000 people is to be leveled in the first days of the US air war.

The invasion itself would reportedly involve up to 100,000 US soldiers and Marines, with another 150,000 held in reserve.

These forces would attack from Kuwait and several other surrounding countries.

The greatest fear of the military brass is that the Bush administration's goal of "regime change" will be achieved only through bloody house-to-house combat in Baghdad, resulting in large numbers of US casualties and a horrific death toll among Iraqi civilians. Some have reportedly warned that if such combat is not ended within days, the US will face the threat of popular upheavals throughout the Middle East.

According to military strategists, January and February are the ideal months for launching a war against the Arab nation because the shorter days would accentuate the nighttime superiority of US forces and cooler weather would make it easier for ground troops to deploy in the region wearing chemical-protective gear.

Independent of any congressional debate or UN deliberations, the Bush administration is plainly preparing to launch its war during that time period. Tens of thousands of combat troops and vast amounts of military hardware and munitions are already pouring into the Gulf region.

In one key administrative change signaling the approach of US military action, the Pentagon ordered troops in the secretive Special Operations Command to leave their military units and join units directed by the Central Intelligence Agency. This would enable Washington to send these forces, trained in sabotage and assassination, into Iraq, while publicly denying that it had any combat forces on the ground there.

The US already has nearly 60,000 military personnel within striking distance of Iraq, part of a vast permanent deployment in the region that it has developed in the decade since the Persian Gulf War. Two carrier battle groups—one in the Persian Gulf and another in the Mediterranean Sea—are in place with 25,000 sailors and Marines aboard. Combat troops are deployed in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the other Persian Gulf sheikhdoms, while Air Force units are stationed in Turkey, Oman and Diego Garcia. Approximately 800 Special Operations troops are presently in the French colony of Djibouti.

Several thousand soldiers are stationed at Camp Doha in Kuwait—just 35 miles from the Iraqi border—together with enough heavy equipment for a brigade, including 150 heavy tanks and hundreds of other armored vehicles, as well as artillery, a Patriot antimissile system and dozens of combat aircraft.

This force is being steadily augmented by other units that are arriving in the region almost daily, ostensibly as part of previously scheduled training missions. Thus, an estimated 2,200 Marines began amphibious assault exercises in Kuwait this week. Several thousand more combat Army soldiers are arriving as well, either for training missions or to replace other units. More than 600 senior military planners from the Florida-based US Central Command are going to Qatar, allegedly for training in how to set up a military headquarters in a crisis.

By mid-October, another 20,000 Marines from Camp

Pendleton, California are to arrive in the region.

While such exercises have indeed been ongoing for several years, it is widely believed that those now being sent in will stay, as will the units that they were supposed to replace. This would allow the assembling of an invasion force in a matter of weeks. The planners sent to the sprawling new Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar are expected to remain as the forward command-and-control center for the war on Iraq.

Earlier this month, it was reported that the Pentagon had chartered a large civilian cargo carrier to ferry battle tanks to the Gulf region by the end of September. Military sources, however, later said that the real cargo consisted of missiles and other munitions to be used in the air war.

Pentagon officials have suggested that newly developed hi-tech weapons will be utilized in the attack on Iraq, providing the military and the arms manufacturers with their first opportunity to test them out on human targets.

Meanwhile, the US administration has floated plans to train Iraqi political dissidents for use in an upcoming invasion. Initially, the *Los Angeles Times* carried a report saying that up to 10,000 would be given training. Pentagon and White House officials quickly disputed these numbers, saying that the real number would be closer to 1,000. Nor, officials said, will the dissidents be given combat training. They would be used mainly as translators, scouts and possibly guards in detention camps.

Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, his deputy Paul Wolfowitz and others in the Pentagon's right-wing civilian hierarchy have reportedly been pressing for the arming of the Iraqi opposition, while those in the CIA and State Department, who have worked more closely with these elements, are openly skeptical about their ability to mobilize any forces capable of combat. The groups that Washington is sponsoring include Iraqi royalists, ex-military officers as well as Kurdish and Shiite groups that are united only in their pursuit of US aid.

Washington's ultimate aim is to select corrupt and pliable figures from these organizations to serve as figureheads in a colonial-style protectorate in Iraq. The principal task of such a regime would be guaranteeing unfettered control by the US oil conglomerates over the country's petroleum reserves.



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