

US masses forces for war on Iraq

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While Washington goes through the diplomatic motions of moving a resolution on weapons inspection through the United Nations Security Council, the Pentagon continues its systematic buildup of forces in preparation for a military attack on Iraq.

On November 2, some 8,000 sailors and Marines set sail for the Persian Gulf from San Diego with the seven-ship battle group of the aircraft carrier *Constellation*. The battle group carries 72 Navy and Marine Corps warplanes, which would be used in the round-the-clock bombardment of Baghdad and other Iraqi cities that is expected to precede a ground invasion. It also includes a guided-missile destroyer and two guided-missile cruisers that would be used to launch cruise missiles at Iraqi targets.

The USS *Harry S. Truman*, another carrier, has been the centerpiece of a huge war game off the North Carolina coast involving some 15,000 US military personnel. The scenario for the exercise is modeled on an invasion of Iraq. The nuclear-powered *Truman's* battle group includes up to 12 surface ships and submarines as well as eight aircraft squadrons. It also carries the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit, which is slated for use in a ground war against Iraq. Soon after the conclusion of the war game, this group too will prepare to head for the Persian Gulf and is expected to arrive there in late December or early January.

While these carriers are ostensibly being sent to relieve two others—the USS *Abraham Lincoln* and the USS *George Washington*, which are in the Persian Gulf and Mediterranean Sea respectively—it is widely expected that the four will remain in striking distance of Iraq, awaiting an order to attack. Pentagon planners have set January or early February as the optimum period for launching a war in the region because of cooler temperatures and longer nights.

“You could make a case that with normal rotations, if you did the math, you could have up to four carrier battle groups deployed,” Vice Admiral Timothy Keating, the commander of the Fifth Fleet, told the *New York Times*. “Could they end up in the Arabian Gulf? Sure. It depends on where we want them to go. It depends on what the president tells us to do.”

Three massive military cargo vessels—the USNS *Bellatrix*, USNS *Bob Hope* and USNS *Fisher*—also headed for the

Persian Gulf early this week. The ships, among the largest in the US Navy, are nearly as big as aircraft carriers and are capable of carrying tanks, helicopters and other heavy equipment on their seven decks. A Navy spokesman refused to comment on the final destination of the cargo vessels, declaring only, “It is part of the repositioning of forces and equipment in support of the war on terror.”

Meanwhile, military officials announced last week that part of the 2nd Marine Division will be deployed soon from Camp Lejeune in North Carolina to eastern Africa, but they refused to say how many would go or when they would depart.

Thousands of additional troops have been brought into the region ostensibly as part of regularly scheduled training operations. The 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit is participating in the “Eager Mace” military exercise in Kuwait, where the ruling family has cordoned off a quarter of the country for use by the US military. The Marines are practicing both amphibious landings and what the Pentagon refers to as “Military Operations in Urban Terrain,” i.e., preparing for house-to-house fighting in Baghdad, a city of five million people.

Army troops, meanwhile, have been brought in for another exercise, “Internal Look,” and there is widespread speculation that they too are being positioned for an attack on the Arab country. The Army’s 82nd Airborne, which would be used in an Iraqi invasion, is quietly being withdrawn from Afghanistan in preparation for redeployment.

Kuwait is likely to serve as the main staging area for an invasion. Advance elements of five American divisions are reportedly already in the country preparing to erect quarters as well as communications networks for the military force. Already, more than 9,000 US military personnel are in the country, approximately 10 times the size of the US force that was permanently stationed there in the aftermath of the first Gulf war.

Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheik Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah stated this week, to no one’s surprise, that the ruling family will allow US forces to use Kuwait’s bases in a war on neighboring Iraq. “They are here in our bases.... How can

they not use them?” he said. US forces are already deployed at two Kuwaiti air bases, in the desert at Camp Doha and on the outskirts of Kuwait City. Another base is being readied in the south of the country.

Meanwhile, in nearby Qatar, preparations are being made for the forward positioning at the Al-Udeid air base of the US Central Command headquarters, which is normally based in Tampa, Florida. General Tommy Franks, the commander of the Central Command, is scheduled to arrive in Qatar in early December for another military exercise involving 600 headquarters members. It is widely speculated that once there, they will stay. The base is already occupied by 2,000 troops and boasts a 15,000-foot runway, the largest in the region.

Military planners have indicated that a ground force numbering up to a quarter of a million troops may be assembled before an attack aimed at conquering the country. Much of the manpower and war materiel, however, is already in place in the Gulf as a result of the unceasing military buildup in the region since the last war against Iraq in 1991. As a result of this “prepositioning,” the time it would take to bring together an invasion force could be reduced to a matter of weeks, if not days.

More than 400 Bradley fighting vehicles, 300 tanks and hundreds of artillery pieces, together with other ordinance, munitions and vehicles are stored in scores of warehouses located in Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain, as well as on ships docked off Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. The equipment at those four locations alone is sufficient for a force of over 20,000, according to Pentagon planners.

Additional equipment is stored at the Incirlik air base in Adana Turkey, just hours from Iraq’s northern border, as well as in Saudi Arabia.

Hundreds of US Air Force military transport planes together with chartered civilian airliners are available to bring soldiers into the region, “marry” them with the equipment and send them into Iraq.

Between the Gulf states and Turkey, the US has stationed more than 300 Air Force and Navy attack jets, as well as a full contingent of electronic surveillance, radar and refueling planes. These aircraft, together with the scores of carrier-based attack jets, have already begun a low-intensity war against Iraq, regularly bombing both military and civilian targets on the pretext of responding to Iraqi ground fire.

The attacks, carried out under the cover of enforcing the “no-fly zones” imposed by the US and Britain in northern and southern Iraq, are aimed at crippling the country’s air defense system in advance of an invasion. Pilots are also using the daily sorties to rehearse for a full-scale bombing campaign.

The Pentagon has also quietly carried out key logistical

preparations for war. Air Force officials revealed last week that climate-controlled shelters for B-2 stealth bombers are being dispatched to air bases in England and Diego Garcia. The B-2 bombers are to play a leading role in pounding Iraq’s cities before a ground invasion. While the radar-evading bombers were used both in the Balkans and Afghanistan, this would mark the first time they were deployed to “forward operating locations” outside of their home base in Missouri. The planes must be treated with special coatings of paint and fiber in a controlled environment.

The Army, meanwhile, has begun equipping its engineering units with new portable bridges that expand in retractable sections once placed on the water. These devices would be used in the rapid movement of troops across the Euphrates River to cut off Baghdad. In September, the 1st Cavalry Division conducted extensive exercises at Fort Hood, Texas to practice with the new equipment. Military officials have said that the unit would be among the first deployed in an Iraqi invasion.

USA Today revealed last week that Israel is providing substantial assistance to the US military in preparation for war. Citing US military and intelligence officials, the newspaper reported that the Israeli government is “helping train soldiers and Marines for urban warfare, conducting clandestine surveillance missions in the western Iraqi desert and allowing the United States to place combat supplies in Israel.”

Both the Bush administration and the Sharon government have remained silent on this collaboration, for fear that Israel’s role in the campaign will further inflame anger over US aggression throughout the Arab and Islamic world.

USA Today reported: “Israeli infantry units with experience in urban warfare during the Palestinian uprising helped train US Army and Marine counterparts this summer and fall for possible urban battles in Iraq, a foreign defense official said. The Israelis have built two mock cities, complete with mosques, hanging laundry and even the odd donkey meandering down dusty streets.” The newspaper said that the sites “far surpass US facilities,” and that their locations are classified.



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