

Mass demonstrations in Middle East against Iraq war

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Angry demonstrators poured onto the streets in Egypt, Yemen and Bahrain last week to protest US and British plans to attack Iraq. They demanded that Arab leaders meeting at an Arab League summit in Sharm El-Sheik, the Egyptian resort on the Red Sea, provide no support for a war on Iraq.

In Egypt, the most populous Arab country, at least 100,000 people converged February 27 on Cairo's main stadium. Protestors from all over the country began arriving at the stadium early in the morning to show their solidarity with the Iraqi and Palestinian people.

They chanted slogans such as "Down with America," waved Iraqi and Palestinian flags, and kicked effigies of US President George W. Bush. Safeya Mohamed, a 20-year-old student from Ismailia, a city alongside the Suez Canal, said, "We came here because we cannot watch our brothers and sisters being killed in Palestine and about to be killed in Iraq and remain silent."

The mass rally was organised by a broad coalition of groups. The protestors included Sunni Muslim and Coptic Christian leaders who demanded that the Arab leaders take a united stand against US demands for help in the war effort. Despite the fact that the Egyptian government sanctioned the demonstration, the security police were out in huge numbers and carried out arbitrary arrests. According to Amnesty International, more than a dozen people are still in custody and have been deprived of access to their families and lawyers.

Protest marches in Egypt continued over the succeeding two days. On February 28, 3,000 demonstrated outside Cairo's Al Azhar Mosque. On Saturday, demonstrations were held at several universities. Some 1,000 students and professors demonstrated at Cairo University, calling on Arab leaders to "wake up" and accusing their governments

of cowardice. They waved Iraqi and Palestinian flags, called on the Egyptian government to close the Suez Canal to US warships, and demanded that the American, British and Israeli ambassadors be expelled. At the university in Helwan, a large industrial city south of Cairo, some 2,000 students burnt an effigy of Bush and set fire to US and Israeli flags.

The largest demonstration in the Middle East took place in Yemen, where 300,000 took to the streets on March 1 in Sana'a, the Yemeni capital, denouncing the US and Israel as the "axis of evil." They carried placards saying "No blood for oil!" and chanted "No military bases on Arab land."

While there have been several anti-US demonstrations in Yemen, this was by far the largest. The huge turnout reflected the mounting anger as the US and Britain pour troops and arms into the region in preparation for an attack on Iraq. Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain have US bases that will be used as launching pads for the war, while Saudi Arabia has provided the US with a base since the 1991 Gulf War.

The demonstrators called on Arab leaders not to give Washington any help in its war against Iraq and demanded that they eject US forces based in their countries. Abdul Karim al-Iryani, Yemen's senior presidential advisor, appealed to Arab leaders to oppose any aggression against Iraq.

The day before, 6,000 people chanted anti-war slogans such as "Death to America! We are All Human Shields for Iraq." They burned an effigy of Bush and tried to march on the US embassy, but security forces prevented them from reaching the site.

On February 28, 5,000 demonstrators marched nearly a mile from the Ras Rumman Mosque in Manama, the capital of Bahrain, to United Nations offices. Some carried placards accusing Washington of plotting war to

seize Iraq's oil reserves and strengthen Israel. Others demanded that the Bahraini government close the US Navy base on the island and expel the US ambassador if Washington attacked Iraq.

The size of these demonstrations, in countries notorious for government repression, testifies to the pent-up anger within the Arab population. Social conditions in the Middle East, despite the presence in the region of huge oil reserves, are among the most wretched in the world. Social grievances are now coalescing deep disgust and frustration over the Arab leaders' refusal to defend the Palestinians against Israeli repression and come to the aid of the Iraqi people against the US.

The immediate occasion for these unprecedented demonstrations was the emergency Arab League summit, hastily called by the Arab leaders in an attempt to ward off a war against Iraq, placate their own people, and shore up their own tottering regimes. Caught between a rock—the US, upon which they are all dependent—and a hard place—their own people—the Arab bourgeois governments fear they will be blown away in the coming maelstrom of war. Arab leaders acknowledged at the summit that they were staring into the abyss.

Abr Moussa, the Arab league's secretary general, warned that the war would “open the gates of hell,” and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said it would ignite “a gigantic fire” of violence and terror. Syria's *al-Baath* newspaper, the official mouthpiece of President Bashar el-Asad's Baathist regime, put it even more bluntly. It said, “The first shot in the Anglo-Saxon war on Iraq will be the coup de grace to the corpse of the Arab system—that least influential player in what is happening in the world today.”

David Hirst, the British *Guardian* newspaper's veteran Middle East reporter, cited Amira Howeidi, an Egyptian journalist, as saying, “One missile on Baghdad and things are going to start going crazy, especially at the universities.”

Having been forced to call the summit after the French, German and Russian leaders voiced their opposition to US war plans, the Arab leaders were unable to conceal their disarray and the deep divisions among them. The summit was nothing short of a disaster.

The Gulf States lined up with America and called for

Saddam Hussein to go into exile. The Iraqi delegate denounced this as an “alliance with the devil.” Syria insisted on UN sanction for any war against its neighbour.

A public slanging match broke out, broadcast live throughout the region until Egyptian state television pulled the plug and ended its coverage of the meeting. Prince Abdullah, Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler stormed out of the meeting after Libya's Colonel Gaddafi attacked him for seeking US protection during the 1991 Gulf War. “You are a liar and your grave awaits you,” Abdullah said. It took more than half an hour before order was restored and the meeting could continue.

The final declaration was full of empty platitudes. It declared the League's “total rejection of any attack on Iraq” and called for the crisis to be resolved through international channels. It urged Arabs not to “participate in any military action aimed at Iraq's or any Arab country's safety and territorial integrity” and asked that the weapons inspectors be given “ample time” to carry out their work.



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