

Egyptian ministerial conference:

Middle East leaders rubberstamp US occupation of Iraq

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The international ministerial conference on Iraq held at the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh this week was a disgusting spectacle of political cowardice and grovelling by Middle Eastern leaders before the Bush administration.

All Iraq's neighbours—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Syria, Iran, Jordan and Turkey—were represented along with Bahrain, Algeria, Tunisia, the Arab League and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. US Secretary of State Colin Powell attended, together with the foreign ministers of the other G8 countries and China, and representatives of the UN and European Union.

As the first major international gathering on Iraq since the US-led invasion, the meeting provided an opportunity to condemn the illegal actions of the Bush administration and demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all foreign troops from the country. The conference took place in the immediate aftermath of the brutal levelling of the city of Fallujah where thousands of resistance fighters and civilians were indiscriminately slaughtered by US forces.

Needless to say, none of the assembled ministers denounced Washington's crimes. All of them acquiesced in the US-led invasion, including Syria, which held a seat in the UN Security Council and in November 2002 voted in favour of the UN resolution on Iraq's alleged WMDs that served as the pretext for war.

Acutely aware of the mass opposition throughout the region to the US occupation and revulsion at the assault on Fallujah, several countries put on a show of opposition on Monday—the first day of the Sharm el-Sheikh conference. The following day, however, all the participants meekly shelved their criticisms and unanimously voted for a joint communiqué that fully complied with Washington's demands.

In opening the conference, Egypt's Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit could not avoid an oblique reference to the destruction of Fallujah, cautioning that “the policy of violence and intimidation and the overuse of force... will only lead to further divisions, damage and destruction”. Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa chimed in, declaring: “While we condemn violence, terrorism and hostage taking, we also condemn targeting civilians and destroying the Iraqi public institutions.”

Neither minister was prepared to name the US as the culprit. Nor were they prepared to publicly solidarise themselves with the armed insurgency against the illegal American occupation of Iraq. In fact, by using the term “terrorism”, al-Sharaa tacitly accepted the lie perpetrated by Washington and its puppet regime in Baghdad that all their opponents were “terrorists”. Iran's Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi adopted the same cowardly “even-handed” approach—criticising the use of “excessive force and bombing of towns” while at the same time condemning the violence of the Iraqi resistance.

Powell and Iraq's interim foreign minister Hoshiyar Zebari simply brushed aside the criticisms, as they did the timid appeals by Syria and Iran, backed by France, for the US to set a date for the withdrawal of all foreign troops. Iran's Kharrazi declared that “foreign troops have to be out of Iraq as soon as possible” but immediately qualified his call by adding, “if not before the end of 2005, at least by the end of 2005”. In the end, all three countries dropped this limited demand and accepted a meaningless clause in the final communiqué that simply drew attention to the fact that the UN mandate for the US occupation was “not open ended”.

This empty political posturing was part of the smokescreen behind which all of the Middle Eastern regimes—including Syria and Iran—have accommodated

themselves to Washington's demands. Above all, the conference was aimed at bestowing a semblance of legitimacy on the illegal US occupation of Iraq and plans for bogus national elections on January 30.

As Abdel Moneim Said, director of the Al Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo, commented to the *New York Times*: "One of the major problems with the American project in Iraq is that it is illegitimate, there was no consensus in the UN, no consensus in the Security Council, no consensus among regional countries. This conference is offering an international and regional legitimacy that the Iraqis can go with."

And that is exactly what the regional foreign ministers provided. Syria's al-Sharaa rhetorically declared on the first day of the conference: "We have to ask ourselves whether we came to this conference to merely express our attachment to the unravelling status quo." He answered his own question by supporting, along with everyone else, a communiqué legitimising the status quo and the January elections.

Within Iraq itself, the proposed election, to be conducted under US military occupation, is widely regarded as a fraud. Already some 47 parties, Sunni, Shiite, Turkoman and Christian, have announced that they will boycott the poll. In comments in the *New Standard*, Dr Wamidh Omar Nadhi, spokesman for the Iraqi National Foundation Congress, gave voice to popular sentiment when he declared:

"How can we have a free election under martial law? Instead of a ceasefire, they attack Fallujah. Are they sure that the aftermath will not be bloodier than Fallujah? The martial law is one of the nails in the coffin of this regime. The last pretext for democracy here is now buried. Their declaration of martial law is a declaration of political bankruptcy."

At the Red Sea resort, however, Middle Eastern foreign ministers rubber-stamped the planned election. A statement circulated by a delegation of moderate Iraqi opposition groups prior to the conference called for the poll to be postponed. Egypt and Jordan half-heartedly raised the issue then immediately dropped it after Powell and Zebari made clear that a delay would not be countenanced.

The assembled ministers not only bestowed legitimacy on the US subjugation of Iraq but offered concrete assistance. Iran is to convene a regional conference of interior ministers in Tehran next week to discuss ways of implementing Washington's demand for neighbouring

countries to do more to seal their borders to "foreign terrorists" entering Iraq.

Powell laid down the law to Syria in a private meeting with Foreign Minister al-Sharaa. As well as making menacing accusations about Syria's alleged weapons of mass destruction, Washington has repeatedly accused Damascus of failing to seal its borders. Powell, who described the encounter as "solid" and "candid", told the media: "The Syrians have taken some steps recently [on Iraq] but we think there is a lot more they can do."

A discussion between Powell and Iranian Foreign Minister Kharrazi had been widely mooted, but failed to eventuate. Kharrazi was nevertheless at pains to emphasise Iran's willingness to assist Washington, not only on border security, but also in pressuring rebel Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr into accepting the bogus Iraqi election. "We have tried to help him [Sadr] adopt more moderate approaches and to cooperate with Ayatollah Sistani," the minister told the press after the conference.

The willingness of Iran and Syria to accommodate to US imperialism simply underscores the perfidy of the bourgeoisie throughout the region. For Tehran and Damascus, the fate of the Iraqi people is no more than a bargaining chip in their own relations with Washington. Iran, which is confronting aggressive US demands that it dismantle its nuclear programs, is clearly hoping to buy some time by helping the Bush administration secure its control over Iraq.

Far from halting US militarism, however, the subservience of Middle Eastern leaders will only encourage the Bush administration to press ahead with its broader plans for economic and strategic domination of the region.



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