

Rice's Middle East tour: Arab regimes back US war drive in Iraq and Iran

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19 January 2007

Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and the Emirates have all signed up to the Bush administration's escalation of its aggression against Iraq and its plans for a military attack on Iran.

A tour of the Middle East by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice culminated on January 16 in a meeting at the Bayan Palace of the emir of Kuwait and the signing of a joint communiqué by the foreign ministers of the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), plus Egypt and Jordan.

The foreign ministers endorsed President Bush's dispatch of 21,000 more troops to Iraq, portraying this as a means of preventing a further descent into civil war. And they joined Rice in welcoming a US commitment to defend "the territorial integrity of Iraq and to ensure a successful, fair and inclusive political process that engages all Iraqi communities and guarantees the stability of the country."

"Nine foreign ministers [including Rice] are meeting in Kuwait precisely to prevent Iraq from sliding into a civil war. And that speaks volumes," Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammad al-Salem al-Sabah said. "We expressed our desire to see the president's plan to reinforce American military presence in Baghdad as a vehicle...to stabilise Baghdad and prevent Iraq sliding into this ugly war, this civil war."

Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal said, "We agree with the full objectives set out by the new plan, the strategy.... If it were applied, it will solve the problems facing Iraq."

Egypt's Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Ghewas was even more obsequious, telling reporters in Cairo on Wednesday, "Bush's strategy is not merely a military action or operation or a unilateral military programme. It represents a vision with different political, military and economic aspects."

Endorsing Bush's plans in fact paves the way for the bloody suppression of the Iraqi people and a worsening of sectarian conflict. The US intends to first crack down on Sunni insurgents in Baghdad, but is also demanding that the Iraqi regime of Nouri al-Maliki mount an offensive against Shia militias, particularly the Mahdi army of Moqtada al-

Sadr. Maliki has already announced the beginning of such a crackdown and 400 arrests.

But the US military "surge" will not stop with Iraq. Iran is firmly in Washington's sights and is accused of being the primary instigator of the Shia insurgency. In his speech announcing the troop escalation, endorsed by the Arab states, Bush threatened that the US would "interrupt the flow of support from Iran and Syria" and to "seek out and destroy the networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq."

The official communiqué did not mention Iran explicitly, but declared that "Relations among all countries should be based on mutual respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states and on the principle of no-interference in the internal affairs of other nations." Sweeping aside the oblique political formula of the Arab states, a spokesman for Rice declared afterwards that this meant Iran.

Every day that has passed since Bush's speech outlining a fresh "surge" has seen fresh political and military threats directed against Tehran. US Vice President Dick Cheney has said that Iran constitutes a "growing, multidimensional" threat to the entire region.

As Rice was shuttling between Middle East capitals, a second US aircraft carrier was despatched to the Gulf for the first time since the start of the war against Iraq in 2003. According to a US Navy spokesperson, the USS Stennis, with 3,200 sailors, is part of a strike group consisting of the guided-missile cruiser USS Antietam, three Navy destroyers—the USS O'Kane, Preble and Paul Hamilton—the submarine USS Key West, and the guided-missile frigate USS Rentz, as well as the supply ship USNS Bridge. It will remain in the Middle East "as long as the situation demands it."

The US already has nearly 40,000 troops in Gulf countries other than Iraq, including about 25,000 in Kuwait, 6,500 in Qatar, 3,000 in Bahrain, 1,300 in the United Arab Emirates and a few hundred in Oman and Saudi Arabia, according to figures from the Dubai-based Gulf Research Centre.

On January 15, the day before the "GCC plus two"

communiqué, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates gave a news conference at NATO headquarters in Brussels, Belgium. He described the beefing up of America's Middle East forces as reaffirming "our determination to be a strong presence in that area for a long time into the future."

He accused Iran of trying to take advantage of perceived US vulnerability in Iraq. Today, he said, "the Iranians clearly believe that we're tied down in Iraq; that they have the initiative, that they are in a position to press us in many ways. They are doing nothing to be constructive in Iraq at this point."

The British Broadcasting Corporation reported that in an interview Rice "denied that taking the war to Syria and Iran would be an escalation." She told the BBC that it was simply "good policy" and was a reaction to unacceptable and lethal Iranian activities against US forces.

Numerous commentators noted that the ringing endorsement of the foreign ministers could not conceal their underlying "scepticism" in the prospects of US success in Iraq. Theirs was a "hands-off" approach that places responsibility on the Maliki government to demonstrate an "even-handedness" to ensure against worsening tensions between Sunnis and Shias throughout the region.

Nevertheless, the Arab regimes have lined up behind US plans to escalate the conflict in the region in the full knowledge that it means more military adventures, civil wars and conflicts that could destabilise the entire region. Indeed, King Abdullah of Jordan warned that three civil wars are on the cards: in Iraq, the Palestinian territories and Lebanon.

For the US, such outcomes are not so much accidental by-products of its determination to control the region and its extensive oil resources as deliberate policy choices. In Iraq, its policy of divide and rule through the deliberate fostering of civil war between Sunni and Shia Muslims is to be extended elsewhere.

As Rice explained in her testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on January 11, "This is a different Middle East. This Middle East is a Middle East in which there really is a new alignment of forces. On one side are reformers and responsible leaders, who seek to advance their interests peacefully, politically and diplomatically. On the other side are extremists of every sect and ethnicity who use violence to spread chaos, undermine democratic governance, and to impose an agenda of hatred and intolerance.

"On one side of that divide are the Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia and the other countries of the Gulf, Egypt, Jordan, the young democracies of Lebanon, the Palestinian territories led by Mahmoud Abbas, and Iraq. On the other side of that divide are Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas. I think we have to understand that that is the

fundamental divide."

The US no longer seeks to maintain the status quo, but, as Rice herself put it in relation to Israel's offensive against Lebanon last summer, to bring about "a new Middle East." The Arab regimes will be called on not only to passively support US actions in Iraq and Iran, but to suppress the domestic opposition that this will arouse. They will do so because their own survival has rested for decades upon US support.

The Arab regimes have sought to dress up their support for Washington's plans by boosting illusions that the Bush administration is seeking a just resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The communiqué agreed that the "Palestinian-Israeli conflict remains a central and core problem and that without resolving this conflict the region will not enjoy sustained peace and stability." They reaffirmed a commitment to achieving peace in the Middle East through a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In reality, US policy in Palestine is to equip the Palestinian Authority of Mahmoud Abbas with the military equipment necessary for it to take on Hamas and suppress all opposition to Israel as part of the "war on terror."

Reports in *Haaretz* at the end of last year noted that, after coordinating with the US and Israel and discussions between Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Egypt was sending arms shipments across the border to Gaza. One shipment was said to be made up of four trucks with 2,000 automatic rifles, 20,000 ammunition clips and 2 million bullets. The Bush administration is seeking congressional support to provide up to \$86 million to bolster the presidential guard and expand Abbas's control over strategic border crossings.

Rice's brief meeting with Abbas resulted in nothing of substance regarding moves towards establishing a Palestinian state. It could not do so because Israel remains Washington's key regional ally and is spearheading its military provocations against Iran. Rice started her tour of the Middle East in Israel, where she held a three-hour-long discussion with Olmert, all but half an hour of which was held in private without officials present. The talks focused on Israel's role in the campaign against Iran.



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