

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner visits Baghdad

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French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner made a surprise three-day trip to Baghdad on August 19-21, visiting top Iraqi politicians and religious figures, including President Jalal Talabani and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. The trip marked the first public contact between the French government and the US puppet regime in Baghdad installed after the 2003 US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq.

In 2003, former French President Jacques Chirac opposed US maneuvers at the UN intended to provide a legal pretext for an invasion. Kouchner, then a leading member of the French Socialist Party, was one of the few members of the French establishment to express some support for US actions, in the name of his theory of “humanitarian intervention.” Now, in the conservative government of President Nicolas Sarkozy, he is working to effect a certain alignment of French and US imperialist interests in the Middle East.

The pompous vagueness of Kouchner’s statements—he defined his objective for the visit as “expressing French solidarity, compassion, and support to the Iraqi people in all its constituent elements”—could not hide the essential thrust of his policy.

He said France had a “particular role” to play in the region, as “the Americans cannot get out of the situation by themselves,” and that “Europe and the UN must play a role in Iraq.” He repeatedly alluded to Kosovo, under US-NATO occupation since 1999, where Kouchner served as head of the UN Interim Administration from July 1999 to January 2001. In that post, he oversaw the dismantling of the old Yugoslav state institutions and their replacement by an apparatus tied to the ethnic-Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army.

He also proposed that French diplomats could organize a conference of Iraqi factions in a neutral location, referring to a conference held on July 14-15 in a Paris suburb, La Celle-Saint-Cloud, of politicians from Lebanon—a former French colony where French imperialism retains powerful contacts. However, in an interview with the French daily *Le Monde*, Talabani rejected Kouchner’s conference proposal as unnecessary.

Conscious of the massive unpopularity of the American invasion of Iraq in France, Kouchner tried to distance himself, rather implausibly, from the US. Asked by an interviewer on RTL radio if his visit was implicitly endorsing the US invasion,

Kouchner insisted that he had only notified US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice of his visit “a few hours” before his departure. However, Kouchner’s visit—described in the French press as a well-planned commando operation run by French elite troops and Kurdish *peshmerga*—included landing at Baghdad airport and visits to the Green Zone, both under US control.

The Bush administration, for its part, applauded Kouchner. White House spokesman Gordon Johndroe called his visit “one more example...of a growing international desire to help Iraq become a stable and secure country.”

Kouchner came under criticism from Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki for comments he made after his Baghdad visit in an interview with *Newsweek*. He told the magazine, “Many people believe the prime minister ought to be changed.... [T]he government is not functioning.... I just had Condoleezza [Rice] on the phone 10 or 15 minutes ago, and I told her, ‘Listen, he’s got to be replaced.’ ”

Following the publication of the interview, Maliki denounced Kouchner, along with a number of US politicians, for meddling in Iraq’s internal affairs. The French foreign minister subsequently offered a qualified apology, saying, “If the Iraqi prime minister wants me to apologize for having interfered in Iraq’s internal affairs in such a direct way, I’ll do it willingly. I think he misunderstood, or I failed to clarify that I was referring to comments I heard from Iraqis I talked to.” This, of course, is directly contradicted by Kouchner’s comments about his telephone conversation with Rice.

Defending Kouchner’s visit, Sarkozy, through a spokesman, told the press, “France must be present in Iraq, France must be present in various Arab countries, it must portray an acceptable international foreign policy.”

Kouchner’s visit to Baghdad coincided with several announcements of definite, if limited, concessions by the US to French imperialist interests in the Middle East.

French oil interests were completely shut out of Iraq in the wake of the US invasion. On August 10, however, *Le Monde* reported that French oil major Total had signed an agreement with a US oil firm, Chevron, to jointly operate the huge Majnoon oil field in southern Iraq, after passage of an oil law by the Iraqi government. On August 14, press reports

announced that Chevron and Total had agreed to bid jointly on Iraqi oil rights.

On August 11, Sarkozy—who was vacationing in the US at the time—was invited to the Bush family compound in Kennebunkport, Maine. According to a report by Voice of America, Bush and Sarkozy discussed the war in Iraq and Iranian uranium programs.

Kouchner’s visit signals, among other things, mounting concerns within French ruling circles that an outright defeat of US imperialism in the Middle East would have devastating consequences for French interests in the region. An outcome that would encourage anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist sentiments among the Arab masses and other peoples in the area is the last thing any section of the French elite, including the leadership of the Socialist Party, wants to see.

A US defeat in Iraq would have many consequences. After all, Sarkozy—charged by the French bourgeoisie with carrying out a massive, unpopular program of social cuts against the working class—has tried to justify his plans with a rhetoric of hard work and the free market, ideas associated with the “American model” in the minds of many in France. For Sarkozy and his reform program, a major setback for US imperialism would also be a tremendous political blow.

For the time being, the French ruling elite appears to have settled on trying to use its political influence to shape the policies of other Middle Eastern countries and thus to manage the violence within Iraq.

In its editorial on Kouchner’s trip to Iraq, the conservative daily *Le Figaro* wrote: “It is time to show that France, and Europe with her, is available; that she is ready, at the right moment, to play a role in the stabilization of Iraq. This is all the more urgent in that exit strategies from the Iraqi quagmire are dominating the electoral campaigns in the US.” It concluded: “The main thing is to prepare for the day when the inevitable American withdrawal will open the diplomatic game.”

In a statement in *Le Monde*, “French options in Iraq,” columnist Daniel Vernet posed the question: “If it is utopian to want to affect Iraq’s internal situation, does France have the means to act on the catastrophic consequences the war has produced throughout the region?” He stressed that Paris did not see a military solution in Iraq, and claimed that Iran and Syria “see no interest, today, in helping the West to get out of the quagmire.” Noting Paris’s ongoing negotiations with Syria and Iran, Vernet added, “Paris is in a good position to tie everything together.”

Such plans for a diplomatic agreement with the Middle East’s bourgeois dictatorships to resolve the situation are, however, increasingly cynical and desperate.

Le Monde’s editorial, “The Iraq Wager,” backed a bloody partition of Iraq along ethno-sectarian lines. It noted that French diplomats “are inclined to think that we must...wait for the current civil war to end in the victory of one camp over the other. In this case, [the victory] of the Shiites.” It labeled Iran, a

Shiite country whose government has decisive influence with many Iraqi Shiite politicians, the “key actor” in the crisis.

The editorial promptly worried about whether even such a ruthless and pragmatic strategy could be relied upon to succeed. It openly doubted whether France has “a card” to play in negotiations with Tehran: “France is already negotiating with Iran about Lebanon: will we now plead for Iraq? How, then, would we maintain pressure on Tehran about its nuclear programs?”

This perspective for the future of the Middle East—its Balkanization and joint exploitation by international capital—faces more than the considerable diplomatic hurdles of negotiating accords with Iran, Syria, and other local powers.

The lull in Franco-American tensions since Sarkozy’s election cannot hide continuing, bitter divisions between US and French imperialism in the Middle East, notably in Iran.

On May 7, the neo-conservative American Enterprise Institute (AEI) published a report naming major investors in Iran in 2000-2007. France topped the list, with \$30 billion invested by such major corporations as auto firms Renault, Peugeot and Citroën, telecommunications firm Alcatel and oil major Total. AEI Vice-President Danielle Pletka denounced these firms as enablers of dictatorship: “If the payoff is good, they figure, so what if they are a rogue regime?”

Despite massive French investment in Iran, the latter is targeted for “regime change” and routinely threatened with bombing or military action by US officials and presidential candidates.

On August 9, the Associated Press revealed substantial pressure by the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) on Total to end operations in Iran and Syria. The more than 200 pages of correspondence, reviewed by the Associated Press, included May 2003 warnings by the SEC that “Potential investors in the United States may find significant [Total’s] history of violations” of US sanctions against Iran and Libya. In a June 2005 letter, the SEC insisted that Total repeat US allegations of Syrian attempts to build weapons of mass destruction in sections of its SEC filings describing its work in Syria.



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