

Adding fuel to the Mideast fire: US unveils huge arms package

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The Bush administration dispatched Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates to the Middle East Monday after announcing plans to funnel a staggering quantity of US military aid to various client regimes in the region. A total of \$63 billion in arms will be sold or supplied to Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and five Persian Gulf sheikdoms.

The arms deal breaks new ground for the US arms industry, which will now supply missile defense systems, early warning radars, equipment for “smart” weapons, and other high-tech components that previously have been withheld from the Arab states in order to guarantee Israeli military superiority.

The giant arms package is another sign of the pernicious combination of militarism and recklessness that characterizes American policy in the Middle East. It is also, at least in part, a response to the desperate crisis brought on by the failed US occupation of Iraq. The one constant in Washington’s reaction to rising political tensions and bloody eruptions throughout the region is more military violence and killing.

The US is selling at least \$20 billion in advanced weapons systems to the Saudis and the five small Gulf states that are effectively US protectorates—Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Oman. The deal has a dual purpose: to build up the military power of the Arab states against Iran and to bribe the Gulf rulers to provide at least a modicum of support for the US-imposed stooge regime in Iraq.

In order to assuage Israeli opposition to the proposed sale of high-tech weapons to the Arab states, the Bush administration agreed to a ten-year extension of US military subsidies to Israel, at a cost of \$30 billion—a 25 percent increase over the current rate. And to maintain the appearance of balance in US policy, Washington will supply another \$13 billion in weapons and military aid to Egypt and Jordan.

The arms and military aid package is yet another exposure of the lies of the Bush administration, which claims to be

waging war for democracy in the Middle East while it arms to the teeth the various hereditary monarchs, military dictators and oil sheiks who rule over more than 100 million people and deprive them of any political rights.

To a large extent, the arms deal is a direct effort to prop up these antidemocratic rulers against their own people, who despise them for their corruption and tyranny and their subservience to American imperialism.

The trip by Rice and Gates underscores the growing recognition even in the highest circles of the Bush administration that the war in Iraq has produced a strategic disaster. The Maliki regime in Baghdad has little authority even in its own country, and it can hardly serve as a counterweight to Iran, the traditional role played by Iraq for nearly 40 years under the Baathist dictatorship.

None of the Gulf Arab states can serve as a guarantor of US security interests in the oil-rich region. The five sheikdoms are too small and weak, while Saudi Arabia, with a population comparable to Iraq’s, is saddled with a grossly corrupt semi-feudal ruling family that is incapable of any serious military effort and faces a restive Shia minority inhabiting the main centers of oil production.

Supplying a huge volume of advanced weapons to these unstable monarchies does little to resolve the strategic problem facing US imperialism. It could even exacerbate the crisis in the event that some or all of the feudal rulers are overthrown and replaced by regimes less amenable to US dictates.

Rice and Gates met with officials from Egypt, Jordan and the six Persian Gulf states on Tuesday at the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh. Rice reiterated, in the course of several contacts with the press, that Iran was the “single most important” strategic challenge facing the US in the Middle East. McClatchy Newspapers noted the bizarre character of this assertion, since “taken literally, Rice’s comments place US worries about Iran ahead of concerns over the war in Iraq.”

The effort to demonize the Iranian regime is part and parcel of the campaign to dragoon the Arab states behind the

US occupation regime in Baghdad. The Gulf sheikdoms have made it clear that they regard the Maliki government as an Iranian proxy, and Saudi Arabia has been providing support, both financially and in terms of manpower, for the Sunni insurgents, particularly in the western province of Anbar on the Iraqi-Saudi border.

By focusing on what Rice called Iran's "destabilizing activities," the Bush administration hopes to convince the Gulf states that the US will never permit an Iranian-dominated Iraq and will do whatever is required to hold onto the territory it invaded in 2003. The Sharm el-Sheikh talks produced little, however, beyond a statement that repeated previous verbal commitments to "continue to support Iraq."

Secretary of Defense Gates touched on the greatest fear of the US stooge regimes in the Persian Gulf and throughout the Middle East—that the backlash against the Iraq war among the American people could hamstring future US military operations in the region, putting a question mark over the 60-year-old arrangement under which Washington ensures the security of the oil despots in return for guaranteed access to the world's largest petroleum reserves.

"There clearly is concern on the part of the Egyptians, and I think it probably represents concern elsewhere in the region, that the United States will somehow withdraw precipitously from Iraq, or in some way that is destabilizing to the entire region," Gates told reporters after meeting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

Gates said that the Bush administration would proceed with the "understanding that this needs to be done carefully and not leave Iraq in chaos." The remark is extraordinary, since it essentially concedes what is generally recognized throughout the world but never officially acknowledged in Washington—that American imperialism is facing a catastrophic defeat in Iraq and is now seeking to salvage what it can.

A key element in the arms deal is the agreement by Israel to the supply of weapons such as AIM-9X air-to-air missiles for Saudi and Egyptian fighter aircraft. In 1986, when a similar arms deal was announced—for similar political reasons, namely to bolster the Gulf states at the height of the Iran-Iraq War—the Israeli government opposed the deal and, using its allies in the US Congress, prevailed on the Reagan administration to drop some weapons systems from the aid package.

Deputy Secretary of State Nicholas Burns told reporters in a conference call that the Israeli cabinet decided Sunday to drop its longstanding opposition to the sale of high-tech weapons to the Arab states. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declared, "We understand the need of the United States to support the Arab moderate states, and there is a need for a united front between the US and us regarding

Iran."

In what amounts to a quid pro quo, the Bush administration agreed to raise the annual military subsidy to Israel from the current \$2.4 billion a year to \$3 billion, and extend the support through 2017.

A major factor in the shift by Israel is the debacle of Olmert's war last summer against Hezbollah, which laid waste to much of southern Lebanon but failed either to cripple the Shiite militia or demonstrate Israeli military dominance. This was followed by the seizure of power in Gaza by Hamas, another radical Islamic party allied with Iran, albeit more loosely than Hezbollah.

The Iranian defense minister, brigadier general Mostaffa Mohammad Najjar, pointed to the influence of the US military-industrial complex, saying the US government was "trying to create a false arms race in order to keep their weapons factories up and running." This is certainly an element in the decision, since the armaments industry remains one of the last bastions of support for the Bush administration.

Democratic congressmen who are closest to the Zionist lobby, including House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Tom Lantos, issued statements questioning the deal, largely on the grounds that it threatened to undermine Israeli security. But Rice reassured such critics, saying that the administration was "responsive to everyone's concerns that there not be any shift in the military balance between the parties in the region."

Such comments only underscore the insoluble contradictions in the Bush administration's foreign policy. By destroying the regime of Saddam Hussein, the most powerful Arab state outside of Egypt, the US has smashed the military balance in the region and set in motion events that it cannot control.

In keeping with the pattern ever since it took office, the Bush administration is responding to the problems created by its program of military aggression by escalating the level of violence. In the face of the debacle in Iraq, it is preparing for a war with Iran that could engulf the entire Middle East.



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