

Bush uses Abu Dhabi speech to escalate threats against Iran

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US President George Bush has used his trip through the Middle East to escalate his warmongering threats against Iran. Speaking at numerous stops in a region of the world where he is widely and deeply hated, Bush has mouthed democratic platitudes while seeking to build support among the Arab bourgeois regimes for a wider military conflagration.

From his first stop in Jerusalem, Bush has sought to counter any notion that his administration's bellicose policy toward Iran has been altered by the US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) released in November. The NIE stated that by 2003 Iran had halted any program to develop nuclear weapons, while concluding that such a program had previously been underway. The report was widely interpreted as a rebuke to the administration's claims that Iran represented a nuclear menace that had to be countered by more punishing sanctions and the possible use of military force.

However, Bush's repeated statements in the course of his eight-day Middle East tour make clear that some form of military action—either by the US or Israel—remains a very real possibility.

On Sunday, Bush gave what the White House billed as a major foreign policy address in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates. Recycling his standard accusations, he declared that a prime cause of instability in the Middle East “is the extremists supported and embodied by the regime that sits in Tehran. Iran is today the world's leading state sponsor of terror.”

Bush accused Iran of promoting terrorism in Lebanon (by virtue of its support for the popular anti-Israeli Shiite movement Hezbollah) and the Palestinian territories (in the form of support for Hamas, which two years ago won a popular election in the Palestinian Authority). Without providing any evidence, he repeated the assertion that Iran “sends arms to the Taliban in Afghanistan and Shia militias in Iraq.” Finally, he insisted, that Iran “defies the United Nations and destabilizes the region by refusing to be open and transparent about its nuclear programs and ambitions.”

Underscoring the main purpose of his trip, Bush declared: “Iran's actions threaten the security of nations everywhere. So the United States is strengthening our longstanding security commitments with our friends in the Gulf—and rallying friends

around the world to confront this danger before it is too late.”

The Middle East tour was preceded by a confrontation between US war ships and Iranian speedboats in the Strait of Hormuz—an incident that the US has exploited to heighten tensions and ratchet up its threats against Iran. Washington has portrayed the incident as an Iranian provocation and a US naval officer has said he was on the verge of giving the order to fire on the Iranian boats when they turned away.

Iran has denied the charges and called the incident an unexceptional encounter, one of many that occur in the narrow waters off the Iranian coast that are patrolled by US war ships. On Sunday, the *Navy Times* reported that the voice heard at the end of a recording released by the US, warning that the American ships would soon explode, may have had no connection to the Iranian boats. Instead, it “may have come from a locally famous heckler” known to intervene in radio transmissions between ships in the area.

US rhetoric over the Strait of Hormuz incident was escalated over the weekend. Bush's press secretary, Dana Perino, reported a discussion between Bush and US Vice Admiral Kevin Cosgriff, commander of the US Navy's operations in the Gulf, in which Cosgriff told Bush that he took the incident “deadly seriously.”

The Navy also acknowledged that in a separate incident in December, US warships fired warning shots at an Iranian boat. This is the first official confirmation of shots being fired in the Gulf.

There have been many signs in recent months that the Bush administration and the US military are deliberately seeking to provoke the Iranians into an action that could be seized on as a pretext for intensified diplomatic hostilities and possible military attack.

Bush is able to count on the complicity of the Democratic Congress in conducting his warmongering policy against Iran. Democrats in the Senate helped pass a resolution last September, urging the Bush administration to declare the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps of Iran a terrorist organization. The two leading presidential candidates, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, have repeatedly made bellicose anti-Iranian statements, declaring their willingness to use the military against Iran.

On the same day as Bush's speech in Abu Dhabi, the United Nations International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) indicated that Iran was cooperating with its inspectors, contradicting Bush's claims. A spokeswoman for the head of the IAEA, Mohammad El Baradei, said that Iran had agreed to answer all remaining questions over the next four weeks concerning the country's alleged past nuclear activities.

According to a report in the Associated Press, "Shortly before El Baradei's trip [to Iran over the weekend], diplomats told the AP that Tehran had ended years of stonewalling and begun providing some information on topics including whether it ever had a military nuclear program and the state of its enrichment technology."

El Baradei's efforts to diffuse US threats of war reflect concerns among some European powers over a possible US or Israeli military strike, an act that would further destabilize the entire Middle East. These concerns have had no effect on the policy of the Bush administration, however, which continues to press for harsher UN sanctions. The US is demanding that Iran completely halt all nuclear fuel processing as a precondition for negotiations.

Bush's comments on Iran came in a speech laden with contradictions and absurdities. The US president, whose government is conducting a war and neo-colonial occupation that has caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, announced the beginning of a "new era" that "offers hope for millions across the Middle East who yearn for a future of peace and progress and opportunity."

"For decades," Bush declared, "the people of this region saw their desire for liberty and justice denied at home and dismissed abroad in the name of stability. Today your aspirations are threatened by violent extremists who murder the innocent in pursuit of power."

Bush did not mention that the principle power working to frustrate desires for liberty in the Middle East has been the United States, which has supported and continues to support dictatorial and monarchical regimes in order to secure the American corporate elite's domination over the vast oil resources of the region.

To the people of Iran, Bush promised that the day would come when Iran "joins the community of free nations. And when that day comes, you will have no better friend than the United States of America." The Iranian people could only interpret these words as a threat that the same horrors wrought in Iraq will be visited upon them if Iran does not accede to the demands of American imperialism.

There was, of course, no attempt to square Bush's pose as peacemaker and liberator with the intense and almost universal hatred for him among the oppressed masses of the region. Popular opposition to Bush was particularly evident in Ramallah, the capital of the Palestinian Authority, which received the president on January 10. The US has given strong support to PA President and Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas as a

counterweight to Hamas.

According to a report by the *Agence-France Presse*, the region where Bush spoke was placed in a lockdown to keep ordinary Palestinians away from the US president. "Around 4,000 security officers sealed off the area around the Palestinian Authority compound of Muqata to pedestrian traffic, with numerous checkpoints set up to verify the identification of passers-by," the AFP reported.

Residents in the area were closely monitored and told to stay away from windows and rooftops. According to an Associated Press report, US snipers were deployed throughout the area.

Bush was prevented from flying to Ramallah from Israel by heavy fog. As a result, he had to travel to the Palestinian town as part of a motorcade of dozens of cars that had to pass through Israeli checkpoints. The AFP noted, "Armed Israeli soldiers lined the route from the King David Hotel to the Beit El checkpoint, where military responsibility switched to Palestinian control as the presidential limousine hurtled along the normally congested streets."

Despite unprecedented security measures, some protests did break out, but these were quickly crushed with tear gas and batons by the police forces of the Palestinian Authority.

Bush's visit to Abu Dhabi followed a stop in Kuwait to speak to General David Petraeus, the commander of US forces in Iraq. Bush presented the US "surge" policy in Iraq as a success, at the same time that the US military was engaged in a massive escalation of violence in the environs of Baghdad.

Bush also indicated that the US might put on hold plans for a limited withdrawal of the extra troops sent to Iraq last January. He said that any decision on the drawdown of US forces would be determined by Petraeus, whom he told, "If you want to slow her [the planned troop reduction] down, fine. It's up to you."

Petraeus is due to report his recommendations on troop levels to Congress in March or April.



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