

Cheney's "peace" trip to Middle East prepares new wars

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US Vice President Dick Cheney, during a trip to the Middle East aimed at consolidating Washington's position in its ongoing wars of aggression and preparing new ones, gave vent Wednesday to his utter contempt for the will of the American people.

In the course of an extended interview with Cheney conducted in Oman, Martha Raddatz of ABC News noted, speaking of the Iraq war, "Two-thirds of Americans say it's not worth fighting, and they're looking at the value gain versus the cost in American lives, certainly, and Iraqi lives."

The vice president replied, "So?"

Raddatz continued, "So—you don't care what the American people think?" Cheney responded, "No, I think you cannot be blown off course by the fluctuations in the public opinion polls."

These opinion polls have indicated massive opposition to the war within the US population, without significant fluctuation, for the past three years. The Republican Party lost control of Congress in 2006 largely because of this opposition. Cheney, an authoritarian politician, brushes all that aside.

Raddatz also noted that she had spoken with US troops Tuesday at the Balad air base in Iraq during a reception for Cheney. She explained that she had "asked people who they were supporting for president. Several said Barack Obama. I said, but he wants to get out of Iraq right away. And they said, that's okay with me. These are the troops that you addressed yesterday themselves."

Cheney responded, "What's the question?"

"Any reaction to that?" "No."

Raddatz went on, "It doesn't bother you that some of the troops themselves want to get out of there?" To which Cheney replied, "They're a broad cross section of America. I think they've overwhelmingly supported the mission. Every single one of them is a volunteer."

Cheney's remarks reveal the outlook of an antidemocratic and out of control regime. The Bush administration feels free to flout public opinion, and boast about it, counting on the complicity of the Democrats in Congress, who will do nothing to stop the war.

The vice president's current visit to the Middle East, according to a *Washington Post* columnist, involves "bending people to his will" on a number of critical questions, including an Iraqi oil law that would benefit the petroleum giants and, most importantly, drumming up support for a US attack on Iran.

The 10-day tour of the region includes scheduled stops in Oman, Saudi Arabia, Israel, the Occupied Territories and Turkey. In addition, the vice president has made surprise visits to Iraq and Afghanistan.

As befits an individual identified with covert operations and secret government, Cheney's visit to the volatile region has involved a number of cloak and dagger maneuvers. The first announced stop on the vice president's excursion was the Sultanate of Oman. However, Sunday night, his airplane, Air Force Two, parked on a runway in London and Cheney transferred to a C-17 for the remainder of a surprise trip to Baghdad.

In Baghdad, before encountering officials of Iraq's "sovereign" national

government, Cheney met with the real rulers of the country, US Ambassador Ryan Crocker and Gen. David Petraeus. At a "press availability" later on Monday, accompanied by Crocker and Petraeus, Cheney praised the US military's surge as "a remarkable success," and speaking of the five years of the war, declared, "I think it's been a difficult, challenging, but nonetheless successful endeavor ... we've come a long way in five years, and it's been well worth the effort."

Cheney spent the rest of Monday strong-arming Iraqi officials on a number of issues, including the matter of the oil law and also on legislation setting a timeframe for provincial elections.

The passage of an oil law that would open Iraq to American and other foreign oil companies has been one of the key aims of the US occupation and a principal "benchmark" set by the Bush administration and both parties in Congress for the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Iraq's sectarian elites are bitterly divided over how the oil revenues are to be shared.

The bill's principal aim is to end the central government's monopoly on the development of oilfields and eliminate existing contracts with Russian, Chinese and European oil companies, clearing the way for American and "allied" companies. The draft of the legislation was drawn up under US supervision.

When asked about the issue by ABC News's Raddatz March 19, Cheney readily acknowledged its importance. "Hydrocarbon law ... is one that needs to be addressed. They've got a lot of work to do on that. That's an issue I discussed with virtually all of the Iraqis that I talked to, in terms of the importance of getting that done."

Speaking Tuesday to some 3,000 US troops at the Balad air base, 45 miles north of Baghdad, Cheney made a series of bellicose and threatening statements. He told his captive audience, "We have no intention of abandoning our friends or allowing this country ... to become a staging ground for further attacks against Americans." Of course Iraq has never been a staging ground for any attacks on Americans, but Cheney least of all permits facts to get in his way.

AFP noted that Cheney's Iraqi visit "has been marked by a series of bomb attacks. The deadliest was in the central city of Karbala where a bombing near the Shiite shrine of Imam Hussein killed at least 52 people and wounded 75. The Balad air base [where Cheney stayed the night] also reverberated overnight with US military shelling of suspected insurgent hideouts."

While in Baghdad, the US vice president, according to the McClatchy News Service, spent the day "zigzagging through barricades and checkpoints to get to meetings in and out of the heavily guarded Green Zone." While Cheney pronounced favorably on the "phenomenal" and "dramatic" security improvements since his last visit in May 2007, "His own motorcade, escorted by Humvees manned by troops with machine guns, never ventured farther than a mile outside the Green Zone."

Before leaving for Oman on Tuesday, Cheney flew to Arbil, capital of Iraq's Kurdish region, and met with Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani.

Cheney applied renewed pressure on Barzani to see that the oil legislation was passed.

Cheney also came away from secret discussions with Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish leaders with general agreement on a treaty ensuring an American occupation of Iraq “that will stretch beyond the Bush presidency” (Associated Press). A key item of the backroom talks “was about crafting a long-term agreement between the US and Iraq, plus a narrower deal to define the legal basis for continued US troop presence.” The deal would take the place of the UN Security Council resolution that expires in December. “Administration officials say they probably will not seek Senate approval of the plan.”

The vice president made another surprise stop Thursday, in war-torn Afghanistan. The visit, commented the *Wall Street Journal*, “reflects the Bush administration’s growing worries over the international effort” in that country. Cheney, just as he had in Iraq, made a number of menacing and delusional statements about the situation. At a joint press conference with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, the American puppet head of state, the US vice president declared, “During the last six years, the people of Afghanistan have made a bold and confident journey, throwing off the burden of tyranny, winning your freedom and reclaiming your future.”

Cheney reiterated the Bush administration’s intention to push the European powers to commit more troops to the brutal conflict at next month’s NATO summit in Bucharest, Rumania.

Recent news reports indicate the growing strength of the insurgency in Afghanistan; anti-government forces securely control at least 10 percent of the country, with a surge expected in the warmer weather this spring. Warlordism, the drug trade and abject poverty and misery afflict the Central Asian nation, after six-and-a-half years of US and allied occupation.

The media reported Thursday, the day of the American vice president’s visit, that US-led troops had killed three men, two children and a woman in a raid on the Afghan village of Muqibel in the southeastern part of the country. The victims were all civilians. “The children, both boys no older than 10, had bullet wounds to the head and chest,” according to the *Gulf Daily News*. Angry crowds of villagers gathered and chanted, “We will join the jihad” and “Death to Bush.”

Central to Cheney’s tour is a campaign to secure support for a US-led military assault on Iran.

At the time of the forced resignation last week of Admiral William Fallon, chief military commander in the Middle East, over his disagreement with the administration’s Iran policy, commentators already noted the significance of Cheney’s upcoming visit to the region.

A *US News & World Report* blog March 11, devoted to “signs the US may be headed for war in Iran,” observed that the vice president would be visiting Oman, “a key military ally and logistics hub for military operations in the Persian Gulf.... Cheney is also going to Saudi Arabia, whose support would be sought before any military action, given its ability to increase oil supplies if Iran’s oil is cut off.”

The same article also took note of Cheney’s “high-profile” visit to the Middle East in March 2002, which officials at the time claimed “was about diplomacy toward Iraq and not war, which began a year later.”

In his interview with Cheney in Oman, ABC’s Raddatz remarked, “You’ve certainly ratcheted up the rhetoric about Iran,” to which Cheney responded, “I’ve been pretty consistent over time about Iran.” The television correspondent then asked the vice president, “Can you foresee any point where military action would be taken? I ask you this because when you come over here, people in the region start thinking you’re over here to plan some sort of military action.” Cheney replied, candidly, “Well, I suppose that’s because of my past history.”

He added, “I think the important thing to keep in mind is the objective that we share with many of our friends in the region, and that is that a nuclear-armed Iran would be very destabilizing for the entire area.”

In the ABC interview, Cheney essentially dismissed the findings of the US government’s National Intelligence Estimate, which concluded that Iran had ended its nuclear weapons program in 2003. The vice president indicated that “we don’t know whether or not they’ve restarted” the weaponization process.

In a classic case of “protesting too much,” a Cheney aide stressed Thursday in Washington that the vice president’s tour “was not intended to set the stage for military action against Iran” (AFP). Every indicator suggests otherwise. The talks in Oman in particular, according to this very same individual, were “expected to focus on US efforts to contain Iran’s influence and curb its nuclear program.”

The unnamed aide revealed that Iran “has got to be very high” on the agenda for the talks. “The Omanis, like a lot of other people, are concerned by the escalating tensions between the rest of the world community and Iran, by some of Iran’s activities, particularly in the nuclear field, but outside its borders as well,” the official said.

Even ahead of his trip, Cheney was “ratcheting up the rhetoric” against the Iranian regime. In a March 11 speech to the right-wing Heritage Foundation, the vice president warned that Iran might be a growing threat to Israel in the Gaza Strip. “Tehran may increasingly be turning its sights to inflaming the situation in the Gaza Strip,” the vice president claimed. “In Gaza, crude, home-made weapons meant to terrorize Israeli civilians are being augmented by more advanced, longer-range weapons that are clearly smuggled in from the outside.”

The debacle in Iraq and Afghanistan, which has laid waste to the two countries and cost more than a million lives, has done nothing to lessen the belligerence of the faction of the US ruling elite for which Cheney speaks. On the contrary, the setbacks have increased its desperation and rapacity. There are sharp divisions over policy toward the Middle East, but all elements of the American establishment begin from the premise that the US must have unrestricted dominance over oil and energy supplies.

Under conditions of the threatened “unwinding” of the US and global financial system (Cheney, like Bush, calls it “a rough patch,” and the operation of “the normal cycle in a private sector economy”), the American elite will be driven more than ever to take the most extreme measures. Cheney’s tour, with its combination of bullying and bribery, will continue on to Saudi Arabia, Israel and Turkey.



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