

Washington deploys warships off the coast of Lebanon

Bill Van Auken
1 March 2008

The Bush administration has ordered the deployment of US Navy warships, including the guided missile destroyer USS Cole, off the coast of Lebanon and Israel, escalating the threat of a wider war in the Middle East.

The Cole, capable of striking targets throughout the region with cruise missiles, is expected to be joined soon by the US Navy's Nassau battle group, which includes six vessels, including amphibious landing craft, as well as a contingent of over 2,000 Marines.

The deployment constitutes a "show of support for regional stability" because of "concern about the situation in Lebanon," a Pentagon official told Agence France-Press.

In reality this naked exercise in gunboat diplomacy can only serve to increase tensions and make a regional war all the more likely.

The immediate target of the military buildup appears to be Syria and opposition political forces in Lebanon itself, particularly Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia mass movement that Washington has branded as a terrorist organization.

The military action was joined Thursday by the Bush administration's announcement of another round of sanctions against Syria, this time directed at four named individuals alleged to have played a role in supporting the anti-occupation resistance in neighboring Iraq.

"We don't succumb to threats and military intimidation practiced by the United States to implement its hegemony over Lebanon," said Hezbollah legislator Hassan Fadlallah, who declared the naval deployment a direct threat to Lebanon's sovereignty. "This proves the confrontation is with decision-makers in Washington," he added.

Politicians linked to the US-backed government claimed that Washington had ordered the deployment without any consultation with Lebanese officials.

The US naval deployment coincided with yet another postponement of a parliamentary vote to fill the office of the Lebanese president, which has been vacant for the past four months. Washington is anxious to consolidate a US-dominated regime in Lebanon around Prime Minister Fouad Siniora to further its broader aims of controlling the region

and its vital energy resources.

This week saw the 15th such postponement, derailing a mediation attempt by Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa and making the selection of a new president unlikely until after an Arab summit scheduled in Damascus for March 29-30. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and some other Arab heads of state aligned with the US-backed ruling coalition in Lebanon have indicated that they will boycott the summit unless the political impasse is resolved and a Lebanese president is in attendance.

Washington has cynically opposed any negotiated settlement, instead seeking the installation of a regime committed to destroying the political influence of Hezbollah. For its part, Hezbollah and its political allies are determined to secure sufficient representation in the government to give them effective veto power. The opposition holds a sufficient number of seats in parliament to deny the ruling parties a quorum, thus giving it the power to prevent the selection of a president.

Nabih Berri, the speaker of the Lebanese parliament and a leading opposition figure, charged the US with seeking to block any compromise. In a television interview Friday, he said that the Bush administration was particularly hostile to the Arab League initiative, which called for a unity government and the enactment of a new electoral law.

Washington and the March 14 coalition of pro-US government parties have sought to pin the blame for the government crisis on Syria, portraying it as an attempt by Damascus to extract revenge for having been compelled to withdraw its troops from Lebanon and cede power to pro-American politicians who succeeded in winning a parliamentary majority in 2005.

But there are growing indications that the attempts by the Bush administration to turn Lebanon into a key theater for prosecuting its "global war on terrorism," with Hezbollah, Syria and Iran all as targets, are exacerbating deep-going social and political tensions in Lebanon. The US strategy is threatening to unravel the country's frayed political power-sharing agreement between Maronite Christian, Sunni and

Shia political forces and reignite the civil war that ravaged the country for 15 years beginning in 1975.

Popular protests over social conditions by the country's predominantly working-class and poor Shia population have met with increasing repression. Early last month, a protest against power cuts in a Shia neighborhood in Beirut turned into a full-blown confrontation with the army that left seven unarmed demonstrators dead. The weeks since have seen repeated exchanges of gunfire between rival militias affiliated to either government or opposition parties.

Meanwhile, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, a prominent member of the ruling coalition, used a televised February 10 speech to issue a bellicose challenge to the opposition: "You want disorder? It will be welcomed. You want war? It will be welcomed. We have no problem with weapons, no problem with missiles. We will bring them to you."

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal warned recently that Lebanon was "on the verge of civil war."

Washington has a long and bloody history of military intervention in Lebanon's internal affairs, having acted repeatedly to bolster the political power of pro-Western parties and to suppress opposition from the country's oppressed.

In 1958, President Dwight Eisenhower sent some 14,000 soldiers and Marines into Lebanon to prop up the rightist regime of President Camille Chamoun—who enjoyed financial backing from both the CIA and the oil companies—against mounting opposition from predominantly Muslim Arab nationalists.

Some 25 years later, US Marines were sent into Lebanon again in the wake of the Israeli invasion of the country, only to be withdrawn after the bombings of their Beirut barracks left 241 Marines and 58 French troops dead. Then, as now, US warships were dispatched to the Lebanese coast, bombarding Shia and Druze villages.

The other broader context of the US naval deployment is the mounting threat of renewed Israeli military offensives, both in southern Lebanon and in the Gaza Strip. Israel has carried out repeated air strikes against Gaza since Wednesday, killing at least 35 Palestinians, including a six-month-old baby and four children struck down as they were playing football.

The Israeli government said that the bombardment was a response to the firing of rockets from Gaza into southern Israel. Meanwhile, senior government officials have warned that an Israeli ground invasion of Gaza is virtually inevitable.

Deputy Defense Minister Matan Vilnai employed the Hebrew word for Holocaust to describe the retaliation that is being prepared. He told the Israeli Army Radio Friday that the Palestinians would "bring upon themselves a bigger

shoah because we will use all our might to defend ourselves."

Meanwhile, Israeli forces have also recently conducted war games on the northern border with Lebanon in apparent preparation for another war. In 2006, Israel launched a war against Lebanon, including massive bombardments that left over 1,000 civilians killed and much of the country's infrastructure in ruins.

Nonetheless, the 34-day war was a defeat for Israel, leaving Hezbollah strengthened. A report issued recently by an Israeli commission formed to investigate the conduct of the war described it as "a serious missed opportunity."

The government of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert may well seek to reverse this failure with a new act of military aggression. The recent "targeted assassination" of Hezbollah's senior military commander Imad Mugniyah in Damascus is widely seen in the region as a deliberate Israeli provocation aimed at provoking the Shia movement's retaliation and thereby providing the pretext for another Israeli war in Lebanon. Such a project would almost certainly enjoy the backing of the Bush administration, providing it with its own pretext for targeting Iran and Syria as the supposed state sponsors of terrorism and instability in the Middle East.

The dispatch to the eastern Mediterranean of the USS Cole, a ship which has been identified with the US "war on terror" since it was attacked by a suicide bomber in Yemen in 2000, losing 17 sailors, constitutes a stark warning that US imperialism is preparing to follow up its invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan with the unleashing of even greater armed terror against the peoples of the region.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact