Middle Eastern regimes line up behind US military crackdown in Baghdad and Basra

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24 April 2008

Tuesday's international conference on Iraq has highlighted the venal character of all the Middle Eastern regimes in tacitly endorsing Washington's neo-colonial occupation. Despite their occasional criticisms of the quagmire in Iraq and, in the case of Syria and Iran, pro forma calls for the withdrawal of foreign troops, the foreign ministers of Iraq's neighbours, along with Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf States, all dutifully turned up at the summit in Kuwait to discuss stabilising US-occupied Iraq.

The gathering took place as US and Iraqi troops tightened the siege of the huge, working class slums of Sadr City in Baghdad. Hundreds of people have been killed and many more have been injured in fighting over the past month that began with an offensive against the Mahdi Army militia of Moqtada al-Sadr in the southern port city of Basra. In Sadr City, home to more than two million urban poor, the basic services have collapsed. Food and medicine are in short supply. Residents remain huddled in their homes, fearful of being caught in crossfire or being struck by US missiles and bombs if they venture out.

Far from condemning these latest crimes, the foreign ministers met to discuss American demands that neighbouring Arab states give more political support to its puppet government in Baghdad by reopening their embassies and providing debt relief. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made similar demands on Monday at a separate meeting of Washington's regional allies, held in Bahrain under the auspices of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Rice's message to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf States was that they had to do more to counter Iranian influence inside Iraq and across the region.

These Sunni-dominated Arab states have previously been critical of the US-backed Iraqi regime, which rests on Shiite Islamist parties with longstanding ties to Iran and has been accused of sectarian discrimination against Iraq's Sunni minority. Rice told a press conference in Baghdad on Monday before heading to Bahrain and Kuwait: "I think its extremely important that Iraq's neighbors, who have been saying that the government needs to behave in a nonsectarian fashion and go after Shia militia, takes note of the fact that that is precisely what has happened in Basra."

In other words, America's regional allies should be reassured by the savage crackdown on the Shiite Mahdi Army that Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki would suppress all opposition to the US occupation. Inside Iraq, the US and Iraqi operations in Basra and Baghdad have been backed not only by Maliki's Da'wa Party, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and their Kurdish nationalist allies, but also by the main Sunni parliamentary bloc, which is in negotiations to rejoin the government.

All those present at the Kuwait meeting backed the military operations in Basra and Baghdad. The final statement "praised the role of Iraqi security forces in the face of threats" and "welcomed the government's commitment to dismantle and disarm all militias and armed groups". The UN and permanent Security Council members—Russia, China, France and Britain along with the US, were also represented at the summit and gave their backing to the crackdown.

The claim that the Iraqi government is aiming to "disarm all militias" is simply a lie. The US and Iraqi military is targetting the Mahdi Army because of its hostility to the US occupation and the government's plans to open up the country's southern oil fields to foreign investment. Other parties have been allowed to maintain armed groups. For months, ISCI and its militia, the Badr Organisation, have been waging a vicious campaign against the Sadrists for the domination of southern cities in preparation for provincial elections in October.

While the gatherings in Bahrain and Kuwait were held behind closed doors, there is no doubt that all the autocratic regional governments were encouraged by the crackdown in Basra and Baghdad. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States have been particularly concerned that unrest among the working class and urban poor in Iraq's largely Shiite south would spark opposition among the sizable, persecuted Shiite communities in their own countries. After the meeting in Bahrain, the country's foreign minister commented that

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Arab diplomats had questions about “the ambiguity of the political picture” in Iraq and received a “very good explanation” from US Secretary of State Rice and Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari.

Speaking alongside Rice, Zebari told a press conference in Kuwait that there was “a new mood in the Arab world and in the region that this new Iraqi government is here to stay”. Both played up the fact that Iraq was now to be a regular invitee to Gulf Cooperation Council meetings and that the next conference on Iraqi security would be held in Baghdad. Rice stressed that it had been “a very good couple of days for Iraq... being integrated into particularly the Arab neighbourhood.”

Despite the upbeat tone, there was no disguising the fact that the “Arab world” has offered the Iraqi government only token gestures. Using lack of security as an excuse, Iraq’s Sunni Arab neighbours have shut their embassies in Baghdad and have no concrete plans to reopen them. Moreover, while US demands for debt relief were discussed at the meetings, no firm commitments were announced. While some of Iraq’s debt has been wiped clean over the past three years, an estimated $US57-80 billion remains, the bulk of which is owed to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States.

A sizable portion of Iraq’s debt stems from the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, when Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, horrified by overthrow of Shah Reza Pahlavi in 1979, backed Iraq in the protracted conflict. By overthrowing Saddam Hussein, the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 profoundly destabilised Middle Eastern relations. The “Sunni” Arab states, which had regarded the Baathist regime in Baghdad as a bulwark against the Shiite regime in “Persian” Iran, have been deeply hostile to the emergence of Maliki’s Shiite-dominated government.

Washington’s allies in the Middle East have maintained their distance from the Iraqi regime for two reasons: firstly, because the US occupation is deeply unpopular throughout the region, and secondly, because significant layers of the region’s Sunni ruling elites regard Maliki as an Iranian stooge—part of an emerging “Shiite crescent” throughout the region. Tensions erupted in a sharp exchange inside the Kuwait meeting when Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal declared: “Iranian meddling in Iraq is obvious, and the solution to Iraq’s security problems is in the hands of the Iranians.” Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki shot back: “Is this a comment or an accusation?”

The Bush administration has sought to manipulate these tensions to line up its Middle Eastern allies against Iran. The White House has continued to ramp up unsubstantiated accusations that Tehran is supplying and training anti-occupation insurgents inside Iraq and is planning to build nuclear weapons as pretexts for a military strike on Iran. Washington’s reliance on a regime in Iraq with close political and historic ties to Iran only underscores the incoherent and reckless character of US foreign policy. While deeply suspicious of the Maliki government and hostile to Iran, Saudi Arabia and other Arab states are wary about backing US threats of a war that could make them the target of Iranian reprisals.

Iran’s presence at the Kuwait meeting highlights its political accommodation to the US occupation of Iraq. While Iran and ally Syria made muted calls for the withdrawal of foreign troops, their concern is not for the suffering of the Iraqi people. Iran and Syria supported the meeting’s final statement backing the Maliki government’s crackdown in Basra and Baghdad. Last weekend, Iran’s ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Kazemi Qumi, spelled out Tehran’s full support for the Basra offensive. While criticising US operations in Sadr City, he praised the Iraqi government’s decision to “fight outlaws”, declaring it “was able to achieve a positive result in Basra.”

The attempt to draw a distinction between the military operations in Basra and Baghdad is absurd. Despite efforts to portray the Basra offensive as an all-Iraqi affair, the operation was based on US plans and was supported to the hilt by American and British advisers, air power, artillery, intelligence and logistical support. Tehran is particularly concerned to oust the Sadrists from Basra as they represent an obstacle to ISCI’s plans to develop an autonomous Shiite region along the lines of the Kurdish regional government in the north.

Tehran’s calls for US troops to leave are based on the calculation that Iran’s interests would be enhanced in Iraq, particularly in the largely Shiite south. While mildly critical of the US occupation, Iran’s Arab rivals—above all Saudi Arabia—have pressed the US to stay in Iraq as a guarantee against growing Iranian influence. The last concern of any of the regional powers, as they manoeuvre to protect their strategic and economic interests, is the plight of the Iraqi people. In fact, all these regimes are organically hostile to any social unrest among layers of the working class, and thus come together in their full support for the repression being meted out in Basra and Baghdad by the US and Iraqi military.

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