

Bush Middle East trip highlights crisis of US policy

Alex Lantier
15 May 2008

President George W. Bush arrived in Israel yesterday for the first leg of his five-day tour of the Middle East, which will also take him to Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Bush strove to limit himself to pleasantries in public statements, but even they took on a clumsily ominous character in the face of a region increasingly destabilized by the US occupation of Iraq and Washington's overall foreign policy.

Bush arrived in Tel Aviv amid the celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the founding of the state of Israel, a date that is known among Palestinians as "the catastrophe." For the two days of Israeli festivities, the government of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert sealed the borders between Israel and the Palestinian territories, and Israeli forces on Wednesday attacked Palestinian protesters at several border checkpoints with tear gas.

After reiterating US support for Israel, Bush praised "60 years of democracy in Israel" and concluded, "What happened here is possible everywhere." To millions of people around the world, watching the ongoing repression of the Palestinians and the bloody US-led occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan, Bush's comment doubtless sounded more like a threat than a promise.

At an evening gala with Israeli President Shimon Peres and Prime Minister Olmert, Bush delivered a longer speech. After predictable invocations of faith and allusions to the "war against terrorism," he singled out for praise the crucial role of US President Harry Truman in recognizing and backing Israel in 1948.

Bush will deliver a speech to the Israeli Knesset today and then depart for Saudi Arabia. He refused to meet with Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas. According to online reports, Arab Israeli legislators in the Knesset will boycott his speech to protest Bush's "policy of oppression, the occupation, and Israel's aggressiveness."

Bush's invocations of democracy sound completely hollow in a region populated with numerous US-backed

dictatorships, and which has been plunged into widening bloodshed in the aftermath of the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq. Traveling to the Middle East as a widely despised, lame-duck president, Bush is meeting with a collection of US-aligned politicians and autocrats presiding over increasingly unstable regimes.

Israeli Prime Minister Olmert faces multiple corruption investigations that have seen police raids of several government ministries and Jerusalem City Hall, and is widely viewed as fighting for his political life. When Olmert's microphone was left on accidentally and broadcast him telling Bush's National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley "hanging on, hanging on, don't worry," the press concluded that he was speaking of his own government.

His promise to guarantee Israel's security through military repression of the Palestinian people has failed. At the evening gala, Olmert was forced to acknowledge a large-scale rocket attack by Palestinian militants on the town of Ashkelon.

Bush's pronouncements about furthering the Israeli-Palestinian "peace process" were deflated when, on May 13, his own Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice described real progress as "improbable."

In Egypt, Bush will visit a deeply unpopular military dictatorship, which has been profoundly destabilized by a wave of strikes and protests against massive food inflation in the last several months. The Egyptian government responded by using massed police to put down a strike by tens of thousands of textile workers in Mahalla el-Kobra on April 6, and then banning opposition parties in the April 2008 municipal elections.

In Saudi Arabia, Bush will rub shoulders with a fundamentalist royal family notorious for its brutal suppression of the workers' movement and democratic rights. Bush is expected to ask the Saudi royals to increase crude oil production to reduce oil prices, and to discuss

the US quagmire in Iraq and its campaign to politically and militarily pressure Iran. However, these requests are not expected to be crowned with any significant results.

An acid May 14 *Wall Street Journal* editorial, entitled “Our Friends in Riyadh,” hinted at the intense recriminations building up inside the US ruling elite over US-Saudi relations. Asserting that US-Saudi ties were “visibly fraying,” the *Journal* noted that “Saudi Arabia no longer is able to exert as much control over oil prices as global demand rises, the dollar falls, regional uncertainties abound, and speculators’ predictions of ever higher prices become self-fulfilling.”

Nor is Saudi Arabia in a position to militarily assist the US. As the *Journal* noted, in fact “the ruling Saud family needs American political support and American protection,” and the US’ “recent efforts to remove Saddam from Iraq and institute a democracy have proved an agonizing display of America’s political-diplomatic, though not necessarily military, impotence.”

Washington’s increasing isolation and weakened position were highlighted by recent developments. The US-led offensive against the Shiite militia of anti-American cleric Moqtada al-Sadr in Baghdad’s Sadr City was suspended when the Iraqi government, reflecting tensions between it and its US sponsors, solicited the intervention of Iran to halt the carnage in the densely populated and impoverished Shiite slum. The government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki backed the mission to Tehran because it feared the implications of a spreading conflict with the Sadrist forces for its own survival.

The incident exposed the pretensions of the Bush administration and the US military of having vastly improved the grip of occupation forces on Baghdad and the stark contradictions of US policy in Iraq. It demonstrated once again that the Shiite-dominated regime installed by the US retains close ties to Tehran, notwithstanding Washington’s claims that it is the target of a proxy war being waged by Iran.

The tenuous truce in Sadr City was followed by Hezbollah’s show of strength in Lebanon, when the militia of the popular Shiite party responded to provocations by the US-backed government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora by seizing control of large parts of Beirut. The events of the past several days demonstrated that Hezbollah, which is backed by Iran and Syria, is far more powerful than the Lebanese National Army and Sunni militias which the US has been arming and financing.

Two years ago Israel, at the urging of the US, attacked

southern Lebanon and launched an air war against large parts of the country in an attempt to crush Hezbollah. The attack failed, ending in a humiliation for both Israel and the US.

The latest demonstration of the political and military strength of Hezbollah has provoked angry recriminations within the US foreign policy establishment against the Bush administration. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman expressed in particularly hysterical fashion the ire and gloom of these factions in a May 14 column, which complained that US policy has only strengthened the position of Iran.

“Team America is losing on just about every front,” he wrote, adding that the US is “not liked, not feared, and not respected” in the Middle East.

US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack was reduced to asking “those who have influence over Syria and Iran to encourage those countries to use their influence with Hizbollah.” The *Financial Times* commented that Washington had acted in the crisis as a “distracted spectator.”

Political analyst Rami Khouri told the *Christian Science Monitor*: “Bush and [Secretary of State Condoleezza] Rice singled out Lebanon as a poster child of their success. That makes the loss even bigger.”

The Bush administration has responded by offering further financial and military assistance to the Lebanese army, in a move that threatens to spark an all-out civil war.

There can be no doubt that powerful forces within the Bush administration and the US political and military establishment will press for an escalation of military violence in reaction to the setbacks for US policy in the region, including an intensification of the bloodletting in Iraq and the use of military force against Iran or Syria.



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact