

French President Sarkozy visits Baghdad

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French President Nicolas Sarkozy stopped for a one-day visit in Baghdad February 10, continuing on to Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain the next day. Highlighting Sarkozy's backing for the US-led occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, his trip managed to focus opposition to his foreign policy within the French public and political establishment.

Traveling with Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, Sarkozy met Iraqi President Jalal Talabani and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. The French president promised "support without limits" to the Iraqi government, also announcing the construction of two consulates and an embassy in Iraq to "help" French companies to invest in the country. Sarkozy commented: "My coming here aims to tell French companies: now's the time, come and invest. We have work to do in the region. We are late. There is a new American administration, a new team in France, so let's go."

Sarkozy's trip to the Gulf sheikhdoms similarly centered on the usual fare of commercial diplomacy. He signed agreements on military cooperation and civilian nuclear power in Bahrain, possible sales of France's Rafale fighter jet in Oman and Kuwait, and agreements on medical cooperation in all three countries.

Dassault, the makers of the Rafale, has until now received no orders for the fighter except from the French armed forces—a situation widely presumed in France to be the result of US pressure on foreign governments considering buying it.

Speaking in the Gulf, Sarkozy commented: "These three countries are of British tradition [i.e., former British colonial protectorates] and of marked American influence, and France has not invested here, either politically or commercially, for some time." He noted that "not a single French head of state has come since the beginning of the 1990s," continuing: "France has a card to play here. Here, we sow the seeds and we will fight to defend our companies and bring home contracts."

The principal reason for the absence of French commercial interests from Iraq and the Gulf countries, however, was Washington's determination to exclude them after French President Jacques Chirac opposed the 2003 US invasion of

Iraq at the UN.

The election of Sarkozy in 2007, on the basis of a more pro-American foreign policy, led to a warmer reception of French imperialist interests by the US. In 2007, Kouchner visited Baghdad, and French oil major Total signed an accord with US oil firm Chevron to jointly work on the Majnoun oil field in Iraq. In 2008, Sarkozy went to the Persian Gulf, clinching nuclear power and natural gas deals and obtaining France's first military base in the region, in the emirate of Abu Dhabi.

In March 2008, with the support of the opposition Socialist Party (PS), Sarkozy also increased the contingent of French troops supporting the US-led occupation of Afghanistan, despite the opposition of more than two thirds of the French public. The government's anxiety over mass opposition to its foreign policy only increased after the death last August of 10 French troops in an ambush in Sarobi district, near Kabul.

Despite the outbreak of a global economic crisis centered in the US and voters' massive repudiation at the polls last November of the Bush administration's militarist foreign policy, the Sarkozy government has continued to draw closer to Washington. In the lead-up to the February 2009 Munich security conference, addressed by incoming US Vice-President Joseph Biden, Sarkozy announced that France would rejoin NATO's command structure. France has been absent from the formal command structure since 1966, when then-President Charles de Gaulle withdrew French forces with the goal of preserving freedom of action from a US-dominated NATO alliance.

Sarkozy's recent trip to Baghdad and his announcement of re-integration into NATO are widely interpreted in the French bourgeois media as attempts to obtain favorable publicity in the face of a slumping economy and growing public opposition to Sarkozy's policies—notably expressed in the January 29 day of action, which saw 2.5 million strikers protest throughout France.

However, not all that surprisingly, Sarkozy's visit has not generated positive headlines: afraid of popular hostility to US militarism and unsure of the demands the incoming Obama administration will place on them, large sections of France's political establishment have also reacted with

hostility to the president's latest initiatives towards the US.

Despite hopes that an Obama administration may prove to be easier to deal with than the Bush administration before it, there are mounting signs that France-US relations will continue to be tense. In a sign of the times, conservative journalist Pierre Péan published a book, *Le Monde selon K* (*The World According to K*), attacking Foreign Minister Kouchner from the right. Péan denounced Kouchner as a hypocritical humanitarian who is both corrupt and insufficiently dedicated to defending French imperialism's independent interests in Africa and, in particular, too close to the US-backed regime of Paul Kagame in Rwanda.

Substantial doubts exist about the feasibility and desirability of French involvement in Iraq. Speaking to the center-left daily *Le Monde*, Karim Pakzad of France's Institute for International and Strategic Relations (IRIS) think tank noted: "The Iraqi authorities do not want to put all their eggs in one basket. Favorable conditions therefore exist [for French interests]. Is France engaged, however, in a cooperation 'without limits,' as Mr. Sarkozy said, that's another story...."

The leader of the Socialist Party group in the National Assembly, Marc Ayrault, criticized Sarkozy's trip as a form of "personal agitation" on Sarkozy's part, adding: "The president's visit to Baghdad surprised many people. It's a sign given to the Americans to prepare France's return to NATO's integrated military command." The PS has demanded a public debate in the National Assembly on the possibility of a French return to the NATO command structure.

Opposition extends, however, to within Sarkozy's own party, the conservative Union for a Popular Majority (UMP). UMP deputy Jacques Myard and deputy Daniel Garrigue—who left the UMP over this issue—both have criticized France's re-integration into NATO. Ex-UMP deputy Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, who left the party in January 2007, said the NATO issue was an "opportunity to destabilize the [UMP] majority."

The most extensive criticism, however, came from center-right politician François Bayrou, who leads the MoDem (Democratic Movement), formerly considered a pro-US politician. Bayrou gave an extensive interview in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, explaining the concerns motivating opposition to Sarkozy's policies in the French bourgeoisie.

Bayrou said: "By remaining outside the NATO command structure, we showed that France did not simply resign itself to being in the US sphere of influence, that it was open to the world, that it could say no, which was clearly shown in the Iraq war. We risk sacrificing 150 years of history. And what do we get in return? A few posts for French generals in the NATO general staff.... The French people should have

the opportunity to express themselves in a referendum [on the question of full French participation in NATO]."

When *Le Nouvel Observateur* asked how precisely France's independence was threatened, Bayrou responded: "We are going into a bloc. A Euro-American bloc, on one side, the rest of the world, on the other. This constitutes, for France and her history, her universality, a step back. [France] does not limit itself to the West, it is open, it can demarcate itself, and include the Arab or African worlds."

Bayrou added, "France was the guarantor of an independent Europe that would progressively establish new relations with the US, but one day also with South America, Africa, India. It's a vision of a more balanced world, built on pillars of similar size. That is why I maintain that we are giving away not only our past but also our future, a part of the destiny of France and Europe."

As Bayrou's statement shows, the new Obama administration notwithstanding, powerful sections of the French bourgeoisie view full participation in NATO as a trap for French imperialist interests. The African and Arab worlds are arenas of competition for influence between US and French imperialism and also the home countries of many immigrants in France—whose opinions of the country's foreign policy and frequent revolts in the poorer suburbs of major French cities are major concerns of bourgeois politicians.

However, Bayrou indicates that far more is at stake: the alignment or not with a Euro-American bloc hostile to "the rest of the world," with potentially incalculable consequences for the French bourgeoisie's interests abroad.



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