

US admiral tours Persian Gulf as protests spread

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Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, visited the United Arab Emirates yesterday amid a wave of mass revolutionary struggles in the Middle East that has forced dictators in Tunisia and Egypt from power. As part of a tour of the Persian Gulf-Western Indian Ocean region, Mullen had visited Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and was on his way to visit the East African port of Djibouti and Kuwait.

The trip was a further exposure of Washington's false and cynical claims to be promoting democracy in the Middle East. It was driven by the desire to maintain US strategic control of a critical, oil-rich region, despite mass popular hostility to the existing US-backed regimes. Mullen's main task was to reassure Persian Gulf feudalists that they still have US support, as they consider whether to try to drown protests in blood.

The official US military journal *Stars and Stripes* wrote, "The top US military officer is meeting with autocratic rulers, royal families, and military chiefs the Pentagon has supported for decades. The reason: to listen to their perspectives and offer reassurances to longtime friends."

According to press reports, Mullen's meetings with Saudi officials Sunday focused on the possibility that mass protests would spread, and in particular how to deal with ongoing protests in Bahrain. Arriving in Saudi Arabia on February 20, Mullen said he was "stunned" by the pace of protests. He explained, "The speed with which this has happened has really taken me aback. And I think this speed is going to continue."

He added, "Obviously the Saudis, in particular—but everybody in the region—is watching what's happening

in Bahrain very closely."

This doubtless includes the United States government, whose Fifth Fleet is based in Bahrain, a key Persian Gulf port. Anthony Cordesman, a leading analyst at the US Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), said the US base in Bahrain is "very important," due to the "steady build-up" of Iranian naval forces in the Persian Gulf.

Protests are now surging against Bahrain's Al Khalifa monarchy, after security forces fired on protesters in a crackdown on February 18. Thousands joined funerals of slain protestors yesterday in Manama, and King Hamad released political prisoners in a bid to limit further demonstrations. At least 100,000 people then rallied around Pearl Square in Manama, amid calls for the removal of the Al Khalifas.

Saudi officials are considering military intervention in Bahrain to crush protests. Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) forces have previously invaded Bahrain to prop up the Al Khalifas, after a 1996 bombing in Bahrain's capital, Manama. As protests began this year in Bahrain, Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nayef told the BBC on February 15 that Saudi Arabia would intervene in Bahrain if the situation "gets out of hand."

Mullen met with SANG commander Prince Miteb Bin Abdullah, military aviation commander Prince Khalid Bin Sultan Abdul Aziz Al-Saud, and other Saudi officials. He refused to give details of these meetings, but called Saudi military leaders "friends."

Arriving in Qatar, Mullen downplayed immediate threats of violence and suggestions by Saudi officials

that Iran is provoking the protests by stimulating religious sentiment in Bahrain's oppressed Shiite majority. Iran is a majority-Shiite country, whereas Saudi authorities persecute Saudi Arabia's Shiite minority—which is concentrated in the country's main oil-producing region, the Eastern Province.

There have been no reports of sectarian tensions in the Bahrain protests, however. Indeed, protesters have made calls for religious unity, with one popular chant being “No Shia, no Sunni, only Bahraini.”

Mullen acknowledged: “These are, by and large, internal issues, as opposed to issues fomented by some external force.”

He nonetheless continued the US campaign of saber-rattling against Iran, denouncing it as “a country that continues to foment instability in the region and take advantage of every opportunity.”

Mullen concluded, “We would like to see whatever happens happen in a nonviolent way—that where there are differences, they be resolved nonviolently, and that governments and their people figure this out.”

The Pentagon's call for nonviolence in the Middle East, it need hardly be added, does not reflect a political commitment to peace or democracy. Washington is, after all, fighting two wars in the region, in Iraq and Afghanistan, and backing various dictatorships and monarchies. Rather, it reflects growing concerns that the impact of attempts to violently repress mass protests might prove devastating for US imperialism.

Financial markets are already noting the possibility that protests could spread from Bahrain to Saudi Arabia, bidding up the cost of Saudi credit-default swaps.

They are also warning that energy markets might send oil prices skyrocketing at the news of protests in Saudi Arabia. BNP Paribas SA credit strategist Greg Venizelos told Bloomberg News: “The impact of Saudi unrest on oil prices would escalate further the inflationary pressures already building within the global economy.” Saudi Arabia is the world's largest

oil producer, and another key producer—Libya—is reportedly cutting output, as fighting escalates after the government told the army to crush mass protests.

There are also fears that encouraging further conflicts in the war-torn Persian Gulf, amid ongoing tensions between US-backed Arab regimes and Iran, might prove explosive.

Comparing protests in Bahrain to those in Egypt, former US State Department official Aaron Miller told AFP that Bahrain's vulnerability “to convulsive change and the impact it could have vis-à-vis Arab policy for Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the rest of the Gulf makes it ... a more hot-button issue right now.”



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