

Mideast Reality, Cold Reception for Powell

by Hussein Al-Nadeem

The strong reactions from around the world against the Anglo-American bombing of Baghdad on Feb. 16, and the cold reception given to U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell in his first visit to the Middle East, proved afresh that the Anglo-American power elite does not understand the two important principles of “reality” and “change.”

As *EIR* had warned since the start of the year, the Anglo-American bombing was planned, not because of Iraqi actions, but because the United States and Britain want to prove the Anglo-American empire can impose its will upon the world, whether or not other nations accept that. But, they forgot two things. At home, the United States and Britain are facing the worst financial-economic collapse ever. In the Middle East, nations are turning away from the Dark Age of the Gulf wars, hoping for a new era of economic cooperation. This tendency will strengthen with the Pan-Arab Summit in Amman, Jordan on March 27 (see “Economic Cooperation Outflanks Political Differences,” *EIR*, Feb. 2).

Powell came to the region with the intention of selling the “Saddam threat.” However, Arab leaders made it clear to him that they are no longer capable of living with a new military operation against Iraq, nor the continuation of the criminal sanctions that have destroyed Iraq’s human and economic potentials. They also reminded him that the priority for U.S. foreign policy is the Palestinian-Israeli peace process and the threat of war coming from the new Israeli government of Ariel Sharon.

Official Protests and Criticism

A look at the official protests and denunciations against the bombing of Baghdad gives a clear picture of the state of affairs in the region, a fact which admittedly surprised Powell himself.

In a joint statement issued after a meeting between Syria’s Foreign Minister Farouq Al-Shara’a and Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al Faisal, they declared: “Both sides express feelings of denunciation and anxiety over the recent escalation against Baghdad.” This “came at a time when wide consultations were being conducted to tackle the whole [Iraq] issue at the next Arab summit in Amman in a way that preserves security in the region and the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq.”

The most remarkable criticism came from Egypt, which is the second-largest recipient of American military and economic aid, after Israel. An editorial in the official Cairo daily

Al-Ahram charged: “The U.S. Administration has proven, through these outrages and unjustified aggression, that it does not care about the international Arab public opinion that calls for lifting the unjust economic sanctions imposed on Iraq.” The editorial accused the Bush Administration of using the bombings to sabotage Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak’s efforts to reconcile Iraq with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. It went so far as to call on other Arab countries to stop providing bases for the American airplanes targeting Iraq, and to warn the Bush Administration that “continued aggression and sanctions against Iraq will only lead to harming U.S. interests in the region, and . . . to growing extremism and a spiral of violence which will hit the U.S. interests before anyone else.”

President Mubarak, in an interview with the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera* the day after the bombing, ridiculed the U.S.-British claim that “Saddam Hussein is a threat to the region and the world.” Mubarak cited the horrifying situation inside Iraq and the country’s faltering economic and social structures. Thirty-six hours after the Anglo-American bombing raid, a large Egyptian economic delegation arrived in Baghdad to discuss implementation of the recently signed Iraq-Egypt trade agreement. Egyptian exports to Iraq reached \$1 billion last year and are expected to double.

The United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) and Qatar denounced the attack through their mass media. The U.A.E.’s *Al-Khalij* stated that the “new aggression against Iraq is one part of the bullying being practiced by Washington, London, and Tel Aviv against the Arab region.” The U.A.E.’s *Al-Bayan* said that the goal is “to create chaos among the ranks of the Arab states that had been recently consolidated, and to sabotage any possibility of success of the coming Arab Summit, which would deal with the Iraqi issue and lifting the UN sanctions.” *Al-Watan*, a Qatari daily, said that the air raids were “nothing more than a new package of messages to Syria and Egypt and others,” especially after the signing of the trade agreements, breaking the sanctions, between Iraq and these countries.

Beyond the Arab world, Islamic nations such as Turkey, Malaysia, and Iran also denounced the bombings. The Turkish daily *Hurriyet* ran a front-page story saying that they were part of a series of actions to be taken by the United States and Britain to overthrow Saddam Hussein.

Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad, referring to a statement of British Defence Secretary Geoffrey Hoon who had said the bombing of Iraq “was a humanitarian mission,” noted: “I didn’t know that killing innocent civilians was a humanitarian act.”

Diplomacy of the Empire

Even in Iran, Iraq’s former enemy, newspapers ran harsh criticism. *Iran Daily* on Feb. 19 called the U.S.-British bombings “an act of cowardice.” The daily *Tehran Times* warned that the latest U.S. move demonstrates that the “military component and option will become a prominent feature in American foreign policy in the future. . . . This military option for solving regional and international issues also conforms with

the outlook of the new [Sharon] administration in Israel.”

In short, the military option will not work to distract world public sympathy for the Palestinians. Instead, it will bring the United States into full-scale confrontation with Islamic nations.

Another absurd feature of Powell’s visit was that he wanted to visit six countries and meet their heads of state in just four days, because he had to join the “Kuwait war veterans” club celebrations. This meant that the heads of state would be forced to come to their capitals’ airports for one-hour meetings with Powell, a flagrant abuse of international diplomatic norms. Many of them refused, of course. In most cases, Powell’s visit was preceded by demands from the media of these countries that he should change his agenda from the “Saddam threat” to the threat of war between Israel and the Arabs. Most remarkable was a report from the leading Saudi daily *Al-Hayat*, which “predicted” that “Powell will be told that the U.S. Administration’s priority in the Middle East should be given to the resumption of Israeli-Arab peace negotiations and that Israel must stop its *barbarous* aggression against the Palestinians.”

The second issue of discussion, according to *Al Hayat*, would be Iraq. “The recent American-British bombing of Iraq was not welcome in any Arab capital. The Arabs are still hoping that the sanctions against Iraq be lifted. The government in Riyadh and other Arab capitals realized that these raids further complicate the situation in the region. If further bombing were carried out, tension between the Arab countries will just increase. The Arab states have just recovered from such crises. Thus, observers expect that Riyadh would advise its host that his Administration should stop carrying out further bombings. The Saudi government will also emphasize its support for lifting the Iraqi sanctions.”

When Powell concluded his tour in the Middle East in Damascus on Feb. 27, strong protests issued by Arab governments, and public demonstrations against the sanctions policy against Iraq, forced him to announce that he would recommend a shift in sanctions, on his return to Washington. The idea is to ease the adverse effects of the sanctions on the population, by allowing certain “dual-use technologies” exports to Iraq, so as to assuage Arab criticism. Significantly, Powell plans to shape a “new” regime of “smart” sanctions *prior* to the Arab summit scheduled for March. The reason is that the Arab summit is expected to establish its own coordinated policy, against the sanctions.

The Iraqi government had previously rejected all proposals for a partial lifting of the sanctions, claiming that nothing short of a total lifting of the sanctions would persuade it to resume cooperation with the UN on the question of “weapons of mass destruction” inspections.

The Real Danger: Flight Forward

As has been reported in *EIR*, the imminent danger of a new war in the Middle East would rather come from Washington’s

flight-forward policy of intimidating the nations of the world into submitting to the current International Monetary Fund financial-economic system, and the emerging “war Cabinet” in Israel. The Sharon government has already threatened military “retaliation” against not only the Palestinians, but also Syria, Iraq, and Iran, if the situation in Palestinian areas gets out of control. The “besieged” Palestinian-controlled parts of Gaza and the West Bank are experiencing an extreme food emergency. Many warnings say that the continuation of this situation will lead to the Palestinian Authority losing control over these areas and the outbreak of chaos. In such a situation, the Sharon government would invade the whole area.

This prospect motivated the European Union states to complain that “Israel must immediately end the withholding of payments to the Palestinian Authority and lift closures.” The EU foreign ministers on Jan. 26 called for an urgent meeting of international donors, to raise \$200 million to prevent the PA from collapsing. The ministers allocated \$55 million more in a grant, stressing that the necessary conditions for a functioning Palestinian economy must be assured.” Meanwhile, international aid agencies have reportedly begun emergency food programs for hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in poverty, because of the closures. The emergency program aims to provide relief for 250,000, in the biggest such operation yet, about the size of the earthquake relief program in El Salvador earlier this year.

Powell’s meetings with the Israeli and Palestinian leaders did not help improve the situation, because this issue was not on “his list of priorities.” In his meeting with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, Powell informed him of the steps Israeli Prime Minister Sharon demanded be taken, in order to have the Israeli closure lifted. American members of Powell’s entourage reportedly were enraged at the formulation of a statement by Sharon, reporting on Powell’s mission, saying, “It implies that the Secretary of State is an emissary of Sharon.”

Between now and the Arab summit, anything can happen, including the possibility of a new bombing of Iraq and a major conflagration in the Palestinian territories. This would easily spread to southern Lebanon and Syria. Only a return to reality and a new view of the U.S. role in the world, can hold out hope for the region.

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