

# President Bush's Iraq Strategy:

## The Gulf Dimension

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### Brief Analysis

**O**n January 16, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Kuwait for a meeting with the foreign ministers of Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—the oil-producing states of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. The final stop on Rice's Middle East tour, the visit was an occasion to explain President Bush's newly announced Iraq initiative and to seek the support of the region's Arab states. But an important subtext—indeed, arguably an overriding priority of the trip—was to assemble a united front against Iran, as also shown by the January 17 arrival of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in the Gulf.

### Unnamed but Central: Iran

Following the January 16 meeting, an official joint statement was released with the agreement of the Arab foreign ministers and Secretary Rice. The statement opened with the implication that Iran is the region's first and foremost concern. It then turned, in order, to terrorism, Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and, finally, Lebanon. To be sure, neither the passage in question nor the statement as a whole mentioned Iran by name—the Arab states are reluctant to openly point the finger at Tehran. But the text touched on a series of issues that could only refer to Iran. For example, the participants "welcomed the commitment of the United States . . . to defend the security of the Gulf"—clearly an endorsement of U.S. military presence in the Gulf, coming on the heels of Bush's announced dispatch of a second aircraft carrier and the deployment of Patriot air defense missiles. Bush has also said, "We will work with others to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons and dominating the region," a theme picked up in the post-visit statement, which emphasized that the peace and security of "the Middle East including the Gulf region . . . is critical to the health of the global economy . . . and its destabilization would threaten the vital national interests of all."

The statement also had strong words for Iran's Arab ally, Syria. It "affirmed that all those involved in [the assassinations of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri and Minister Pierre Gemayel] must be held accountable." Damascus has been working hard to ensure that an investigation of Syrian suspects comes to nothing, and the regime will not be pleased by the stance of the eight Arab foreign ministers.

The above emphases amount to a successful step forward for U.S. policy on Iran. Part of the reason for the success

was careful groundwork. Before the Kuwait meeting, Rice had already met with Israeli, Palestinian, Egyptian, Jordanian, and Saudi leaders. This enabled her to respond to criticism that the Bush administration is not sufficiently engaged in Middle East peace efforts and, indeed, has let the problems fester. Despite being pressed, particularly in Cairo, toward deeper and more immediate involvement, Rice avoided commitments, other than a meeting next month with both Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert. She is, however, believed to view as unlikely any quick Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic progress, both because of internal differences between Hamas and Fatah and the weak domestic position of the Olmert government.

Rice's diplomatic gains were matched by confirmation of the U.S. military posture against Iran with key GCC allies. Flying in from Afghanistan, Secretary Gates met with Saudi King Abdullah and defense minister Crown Prince Sultan, even though the kingdom no longer hosts U.S. forces. Iran was discussed, as was Iraq. A U.S. official later reminded reporters that Iranian influence in Iraq is a major concern for the Saudis. Gates then flew to Bahrain, headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, where a British officer serving as deputy commander of coalition naval forces told reporters that the role of the arriving U.S. carrier task force had yet to be worked out. The officer added, "I'm sure there's a message there for Iran." Afterwards, in Qatar, Gates visited the giant al-Udaid air base used by U.S. forces and its associated high-tech war room, the nerve center for U.S. air operations in the region.

## Iraq

The Arab countries represented at the Kuwait meeting are fearful of having their traditional regional supremacy reversed by Tehran, particularly given the success of Iran's Shiite coreligionists in Iraq, the effects of Hizballah's political activities in Lebanon, and the prospect that Tehran might acquire an arsenal of nuclear missiles. These fears are enhanced in Saudi Arabia, which has a local Shiite majority in its main oil-producing region, and in Bahrain, where a Sunni king rules over an often resentful, mainly Shiite, population. It is in this context that the Arab foreign ministers approached the question of the growing Sunni-Shiite sectarian strife in Iraq.

There is widespread concern across much of the mainly Sunni Muslim Arab world over the Shiite dominance in the Iraqi government and its links to predominately Shiite Iran. The Kuwait statement clearly endorsed U.S. pressure on the government of Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki to respond to Sunni concerns, stating that "efforts to achieve national reconciliation that encompasses all elements of Iraqi society without excluding any group should be strongly supported." The statement also affirmed "the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations," another obvious reference to Iran, as was a phrase saying Iraq should not become "a battleground for regional and international powers."

However, the statement's reference to "international powers"—indicating the United States and its coalition allies—reflected the ambiguity felt about the U.S. presence in Iraq. Speaking separately, several of the foreign ministers had a guarded reaction to the U.S. policy on Iraq announced by President Bush on January 10. Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal emphasized the positive but was silent about the additional troops and implicitly skeptical about whether the Iraqi government will actually carry out a proposed crackdown on Shiite militias: "We agree fully with the goals set by the new strategy, which, in our view, are the goals that—if implemented—would solve the problems that face Iraq."

## U.S. Policy Dilemma

Achieving broad Arab support still leaves a potential contradiction in U.S. policy: the United States needs to boost the Maliki government, which rests on the support of pro-Iranian parties and regards Iran's friendship as important. And at the very least, sustaining this new coalition of moderate Arab states will probably require frequent visits to the region by senior members of the Bush administration. Moreover, if Washington seeks more public support from Arab leaders, it will necessarily face greater pressure for progress between the Israeli and Palestinian leadership.

Hence, while the groundwork is now well prepared for increased diplomatic pressure on Iran, the foundations are not deep.

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