

The Abuse of the No-Fly Zones as an Excuse for War

By Stephen Zunes

With the apparent willingness of the Iraqi government to cooperate with United Nations weapons inspectors, the Bush administration and its congressional supporters of both parties seem determined to find an excuse—any excuse—to invade this oil-rich country and replace the current regime with one more to its own liking. This eagerness to wage war could not be more apparent than in recent claims out of Washington that Iraq firing upon British and American aircraft enforcing the no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq constitutes a “material breach” of UN Security Council resolutions that could justify a U.S. invasion.

However, the United Nations never authorized the no-fly zones. From Iraq’s perspective, this is a case of foreign military aircraft encroaching upon the air space of a sovereign nation. As a result, Iraq—like any country—has every legal right to fire upon them.

When the cease-fire in the Gulf War went into effect in March 1991, the Kurds in the north and the Shiite Muslims in the south launched a rebellion against Saddam Hussein’s regime. The United States banned the use of Iraqi fixed-wing aircraft, which could be of danger to American personnel, but allowed Iraq to use helicopter gunships, which were crucial in reversing the tide of the rebellions and resulted in brutal repression by the Iraqi armed forces against the rebellious populations. In response, the United Nations Security Council passed resolution 688, demanding that Iraq cease its repression of minority communities in the country.

No enforcement mechanisms were specified, however.

Despite this, the United States, Great Britain, and France declared a “No-Fly” zone in northern Iraq, forbidding Iraqi military aircraft from entering the area. A second no-fly zone was later established in the south and expanded a few years later. Once the situation stabilized, France withdrew from its enforcement of the no-fly zone, though British and American planes continue to patrol the no-fly zones, which now extend to the majority of the country’s airspace.

According to two State Department reports in 1994 and 1996, the creation and military enforcement of “no-fly zones” in fact do not protect the Iraqi Kurdish and Shiite populations from potential assaults by Iraqi forces. The straight latitudinal demarcations of the no-fly zones do not correspond with the areas of predominant Kurdish and Shiite populations. In addition, the targets of the American and British air strikes have no relation to preventing Iraqi attacks against vulnerable minorities. That the United States has allowed the Turkish Air Force to conduct bombing raids within the northern Iraq “no-fly zone” against Kurdish targets is but one indication of the lack of concern about actually protecting the Kurdish population.

In a classic case of “mission creep,” the use of force was initially justified to challenge Iraqi encroachments into the proscribed airspace. Then, it was escalated to include assaults on anti-aircraft batteries that fired at allied aircraft enforcing the zone. It escalated still further when anti-aircraft batteries were attacked simply for locking on their radar toward allied aircraft, even without firing. Then, the Clinton administration began attacking radar installations and other military targets within the no-fly zone,

even when they were unrelated to an alleged Iraqi threat against a particular U.S. aircraft. Since the Bush administration came to office, the targeting has been expanded still further, with the U.S. attacking radar and command-and-control installations well beyond the no-fly zones.

Despite this, in the bipartisan resolution authorizing a U.S. invasion of Iraq, Congress justified a U.S. invasion of Iraq in part because “the current Iraqi regime has demonstrated its continuing hostility toward, and willingness to attack, the United States...by ...firing on many thousands of occasions on United States

and Coalition Armed Forces engaged in enforcing the resolutions of the United Nations Security Council.” After contacting more than a dozen congressional offices, each of them claimed that this was in reference to the no-fly zones, even though none of them could actually cite any such UN Security Council resolutions that authorize their existence.

What began as an apparent humanitarian effort has turned into another excuse for continuing a low-level war against Iraq and perhaps now even as an excuse for a full-scale invasion of that country. The American public must not allow such legitimate

human rights concerns to be abused to advance the agenda of right-wing militarists lusting for war.

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