

Arab League formally opposes Iraq war

Christine Spolar
Chicago Tribune (KRT)

SHARM EL-SHEIKH, Egypt — Arab leaders on Saturday issued a broad statement against possible war in Iraq that avoided the most apparent split in their ranks — the fact that thousands of U.S. forces are rapidly deploying in the region.

The only leader who raised the issue of troops on Arab soil, specifically in Saudi Arabia, was Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi. His jibe promptly sparked an angry walkout by Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah and the entire Saudi delegation, according to delegates among the 22-member Arab League.

The Saudis were cajoled back into the meeting 15 minutes later by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Syrian leader Bashar Assad, ac-

ording to witnesses at the summit held in this Red Sea resort town.

Despite the blowup, the Arab leaders managed to pull together a unanimous declaration calling for the "complete rejection of any aggression on Iraq."

The rancor between Libya and Saudi Arabia, however, was only one example of sharp divisions evident Saturday within the often-fractious Arab League. In a surprise show of anxiety over the threat of war, the United Arab Emirates floated a proposal to call for the ouster of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

The Emirates' proposal was the first open attempt by an Arab country to discuss Hussein's possible exile as a way to thwart war.

But Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa downplayed the plan,

saying it was never seriously considered by the 22-member organization. The summit, despite the apparent rancor and differences, produced a definitive statement "to reaffirm the Arab attitude: We are not supportive of war," Moussa said.

The summit statement called on Baghdad to abide by United Nations demands to surrender weapons of mass destruction and illegal missiles and urged that U.N. weapons inspectors be given more time to search for the banned weapons.

The statement also said Arab leaders agreed to form a committee to consult with Iraq and to "explain the Arab position" to the U.N. and members of the Security Council.

Some parts of the statement, however, outlined the delicate predicament that some of the Arab coun-

tries face in the runup to war.

The Arab League's declaration stressed that Arab nations should refrain from carrying out any military action against Iraq. The statement did not, however, say Arab states with U.S. forces on their soil should demand that no attack be launched from their territory.

Thousands of U.S. troops have been based in Saudi Arabia since the 1991 Persian Gulf war, a source of controversy in the conservative kingdom. In the past few months, tens of thousands of U.S. troops have deployed in the region, largely Kuwait and Qatar, ahead of a possible war.

The summit's unanimous declaration was undercut by the first outspoken attempt by an Arab country to challenge support for Hussein.

The United Arab Emirates floated a single-page proposal that demanded Iraqi leaders, with the promise of general amnesty, "surrender power and leave the country" in a matter of weeks. The Arab League and the U.N. would then supervise the transition of political power in Iraq, according to the UAE concept.

Support for the proposal appeared so slim, however, that Emirates representatives never presented it to the Arab League, according to some delegates. The proposal was circulated publicly for the first time Saturday among the hundreds of reporters covering the summit.

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U.S. weighs war options after Turkey's denial

Sudarsan Raghavan
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

ANKARA, Turkey — As Washington weighs whether to abandon its war plans to use Turkish bases for a crucial northern attack on Iraq, Turkey's embattled government on Sunday appeared to reject a speedy new vote to let U.S. troops enter Turkish soil.

But it did not rule out trying to reverse a parliamentary decision that has seriously setback U.S. plans for an Iraqi invasion and threatens to fracture both Turkey's government and its relationship with the United States.

"We will take this step if the government decides it's necessary," Turkish leader Tayyip

Erdogan told reporters, a day after Turkey's parliament narrowly rejected a measure that would have permitted thousands of U.S. troops to use Turkey as a launch pad for an assault. The rejection stunned Washington.

The Parliament will meet on Tuesday, but no vote is scheduled.

Some analysts and Turkish officials say reconsideration by the politically fragile government could take a week or longer. If this happens, the Pentagon, frustrated by weeks of delays and mixed signals from Turkish leaders, could be forced to revise its war plans and leave Turkey out of its equation, Western diplomats said.

Already, Washington is mulling a

series of backup plans, including sending its troops and U.S. supply ships floating near Turkey's coast to Kuwait.

Eyup Fatsa, the deputy head of the ruling Justice and Development Party's parliamentary group signaled on Sunday that the United States might be in for a long wait. At least three members of Turkey's cabinet have publicly said they are against trying again to get permission for the U.S. deployment.

"The proposal has been delayed to an open-ended time," he told reporters, following a party meeting to discuss whether to seek approval again. "There is no proposal for the foreseeable future."

But after his remarks, party mem-

bers returned behind closed doors to continue debating the matter.

Turkey has a lot to lose by turning its back on its principal benefactor. It could be deprived of Washington's crucial backing for financial aid and European Union membership. This includes a \$15 billion aid package to cushion its economy from war-related shocks.

Turkey also stands to lose influence over the shape of a post-Saddam Hussein Iraq and will have less power to stop the creation of an independent Kurdish nation that embraces parts of Turkey's own restive Kurdish minority.

"What you're seeing is a true political crisis for the ruling party, a true political crisis for the Turkish

establishment, and a true political crisis for Turkish-American relations," said Soli Ozel, a political analyst at Istanbul's Bilgi University.

Though the stakes are high, many of Turkey's influential commentators do not expect the Justice Party to resubmit a resolution to host U.S. troops before March 9 — if it decides to proceed with seeking another approval.

If U.S. troops are relocated to Kuwait, it would likely take an extra week to sail through the Suez Canal, around the Arabian Peninsula and then into the Persian Gulf.

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