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Letter to Gilbert Achcar

- Debate - Problems of the Arab and Middle East regions -

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Dear Gilbert,

You know how much I respect your judgement - both about revolutionary politics in general and more particularly about the Middle East. Your writings over the past few years have been enormously important as a source of orientation through the tortuous twists and turns of imperialist strategy.

Your 'Letter to a Slightly Depressed Anti-War Activist' has become a classic. But precisely for these reasons I read your piece 'On the Forthcoming Election in Iraq' with a growing sense of dismay. [<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Iraq4.jpg>]

It's been clear for some months that the Iraqi resistance, in the broad sense of the range of forces opposed to the occupation, was split on the question of whether or not to participate in the elections: the radical Shi'ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's vacillations on the issue are a symptom of this since he is something of a weather vane. (It is interesting that the Association of Muslim Scholars, which has links with the insurgents in the so-called Sunni Triangle, has just said that it will call off its boycott of the elections in exchange for the US setting a date for its withdrawal.) I agree with you that whether or

not to take part in elections under foreign occupation or colonial rule is a tactical question, not one of principle. But precisely for that reason, I'm very unhappy about the kind of absolutist tone of your discussion, which doesn't really capture the dynamic of the situation. [1]

You write: 'attempts at derailing the elections and de-legitimizing them in advance can only play into the hands of the US occupation.' Of course it's true that the elections were forced onto Bush and Bremer by the mass protests that the Shia Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani called just under a year ago. But things have moved on since then. Now, whenever any member of the puppet regime shows signs of wavering in the face of the insurgency, it is Bush, Blair, and their creature Iyad Allawi who are adamant that the elections must not be postponed. This reflects the fact that the US has developed a strategy that seeks to use the elections to legitimize the occupation, pressurize the European Union and the United Nations to become more involved in Iraq, and so on. The idea that, as you suggest, the military offensives against Najaf and Falluja were designed by Washington to stir up chaos and delegitimize the elections seems to me pretty fanciful.

One important dimension of the real US strategy is more and more to play on the division between the Shias and Sunnis. I don't know if you saw the article by Charles Krauthammer a month or so ago that argued that it didn't matter whether or not the Sunni areas voted (after all the American South didn't vote in the 1864 presidential election when they were rebellion against the US government), and demanded that the Shi'ites join the occupation in fighting the insurgents because 'it's their civil war.' [2] Though over-stated, this argument meshes in with administration thinking. For example, see the Financial Times of 8 January 2005, reporting remarks of Bush that the elections work go ahead because 14 out of 18 Iraqi provinces were 'relatively calm':

The president's acceptance of the possibility of a low turnout among Sunni voters in Iraq reflects the administration's determination to press ahead with the polls. Donald Rumsfeld ... has also said the results would be seen as legitimate if Iraqis could vote in a majority of provinces. In private, US officials say a 30 per cent turnout among Sunnis ... would be acceptable.

Given the disastrous overall position of the Americans in Iraq, the Shia card is almost the last in their pack (the very last of all is the Israeli strategy of breaking the country up, but I don't think Washington is ready for this yet). Let me quote the Financial Times again (5 January 2005): the US has shown growing acceptance of the Shia parties' likely poll victory. Colin Powell ... said he thought Iraq's Shia would 'stand on their own two feet' even if there was some increase in Iranian influence.

In itself this is a sign of their weakness - that the Bush administration's current 'least bad' option is an assembly dominated by a Shia establishment closely aligned intellectually and politically with its counterparts in Lebanon and Iran. But it means that the US has an interest in provoking Shia-Sunni conflict. I don't doubt that Sunni Islamist groups have made communalist attacks directed at Shi'ites, Christians, etc., and of course we should condemn these. But I find some incidents - for example, the drive-by killings of Shias in towns south of Baghdad, allegedly by Salafist militants - very suspicious. Confronted with this kind of pattern, it is only rational to ask 'Quis profuit?', and also to remember the long and bloody history of the CIA, SIS, and the rest of the Anglo-American dirty tricks empire. This danger is widely perceived: Ali Fahdi, an Iraqi doctor who helped make a terrifying film just shown on Channel 4 here in Britain portraying the devastation of Falluja says 'the US military' have 'increased the chance of civil war by using their new national guard of Shias to suppress Sunnis' in Falluja. [3]

Against this background, we have simply to accept that the Iraqi resistance remains divided over whether or not to participate in the elections. You may be right that the turnout will be very big - it was in Afghanistan, even in areas where the Taliban are militarily active. But will the elections produce a legitimate democratic regime in Iraq? No, no more than they did in Afghanistan. The occupation will continue. The puppet regime will remain in office. This means that if there is a relatively authentic popular vote at the end of January, the anti-war movement should demand that the Americans and their allies should withdraw immediately, allowing the new assembly to select a government that reflects the real wishes of the Iraq people.

But this doesn't imply for a moment that we should, as you do, endorse Sistani's as 'the most fruitful strategy in opposing the occupation'. You can't justify this on the grounds of his having genuinely democratic goals: as you note, in his own way Sistani is as committed to achieving an Islamic state as Khomeini, Bin Laden, or Zarqawi. But more than that - is it really a 'fruitful strategy' to stand by while the US forces reduced Falluja to rubble and butchered many of its inhabitants? Why didn't he call for mass demonstrations throughout Iraq demanding an end to the assault on Falluja? This lack of elementary solidarity certainly 'play[ed] into the hands of the US occupation'.

Although you mention 'legitimate attacks against the US', the thrust of your argument is to sideline the armed struggle against the occupation. Thus you say 'Any unqualified support for the Iraqi resistance as a whole in western countries, where the anti-war movement is badly needed, is utterly counterproductive'. What does this mean? In Britain - where a robust mass anti-war movement does exist - we are very clear that the Stop the War Coalition should not campaign in support of the resistance (in the narrower sense of those engaging in armed struggle) because it seeks to unite everyone, irrespective of their politics, who wants to see the occupation ended and Western troops withdrawn. We have had some measure of success in this: the British military is blaming a decline in recruitment on the impact of the anti-war movement and in particular of the unprecedented campaign by Military Families against the War. [4]

OK, so the platform of the anti-war movement should not include support for armed resistance to the occupation. But what about the anti-imperialist left wing of the movement? You do stress the heterogeneous character of the resistance, but you home in on Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. In framing the issue like this I fear you veer dangerously close to Tony Blair, who says that, whatever our opinions about the original invasion, everyone must now recognize that the struggle in Iraq is between 'democracy' and 'terrorism'. Further to the left, Fausto Bertinotti argues that the Partito della Rifondazione Comunista should renounce violence, refuse to support a resistance

represented by 'Euros' fascists' like Zarqawi - and go into government with the social-liberal Olive Tree coalition.

Of course we should condemn the kind of kidnappings and beheadings perpetrated by groups like Zarqawi's. This is not a new problem. I remember very well the arguments we had in the 1970s with your sometime comrades in the Fourth International in Britain when they campaigned around the slogan 'Victory to the IRA' and refused to condemn the Birmingham pub bombings. We have never given 'unqualified support' to any national liberation movement.

But I refuse to equate 'the Iraqi resistance as a whole' with the obscenities practised by Zarqawi. What about the other tactics that are being used - for example, road-side bombs that kill American soldiers and attacks on Iraqi recruits to the puppet regime's army and police and on its officials, like the Governor of Baghdad, who was assassinated last week? If you condemn these in Iraq, then you must condemn similar methods that were used again and again in anti-colonial guerrilla struggles - from Ireland to Vietnam to Cyprus to Algeria to Zimbabwe. I presume that you do in fact regard these as 'legitimate attacks', but why then warn us at such length against supporting Zarqawi, when only the radical Islamist hard core and a few sectarian-leftist idiots would contemplate doing so?

The reason why this is so important is because what has created such a crisis for the Americans in Iraq is neither Sistani's campaign for elections nor Zarqawi's beheadings. It is, as Walden Bello has so eloquently argued since the first Falluja crisis last April, the guerrilla insurgency mainly in the Sunni areas. It is this that is killing American soldiers, that is forcing the Pentagon to maintain troops in Iraq in far higher numbers than planned and threatening to erode the entire American military establishment (the head of the US Army Reserve complained last month that it is 'rapidly degenerating into a broken force'), that is preventing the creation of stable administrative structures and scaring away large sections of the Iraqi elite from participation in the regime.

Whatever the overall balance-sheet we make of Lenin's contribution to revolutionary politics, one thing he was dead right about was the potential of nationalist revolts in colonial and semi-colonial countries to create or exacerbate crises of imperialism. This is precisely what is happening in Iraq today. Understanding this doesn't require us to endorse the politics of those engaged in armed resistance to the occupation - any more than it (or should have) in the case of the FLN or the Viet Cong or the Provisional IRA. Of course it is a tragedy that secular nationalist and socialist forces are so politically weak in Iraq, but this is a historical legacy that we just have to live with, in the short term at least, while confronting the immediate political realities.

I'm sure you want to see the US defeated in Iraq as much as I do. But the way in which you polarize the argument between those who are for or against the elections and, in your discussion of the armed resistance, your focus on Zarqawi, is much too close to the dominant discourse in Washington and London. I don't doubt that your intention is to help the anti-war movement, as you have so much in the past. But in the next few weeks the movement in the US and Britain especially will face a huge ideological offensive that seeks to portray us as anti-democratic supporters of terrorism. Just in the last few days the assassination of an Iraqi Communist Party leader who supports the occupation has provoked a hullabaloo in the media and the unions here in Britain, with pro-imperialist ex-leftists like Nick Cohen ranting about 'the totalitarian nature of the leadership of the anti-war movement', which 'lets Iraq's fascists fight freedom with terror'. [5]

In this climate, quite contrary to your own intentions, your piece is, to say the least, not helpful. It is, in my view, badly misjudged, with respect to both the situation in Iraq and the debates about the war in the rest of the world. I hope you will excuse my frankness, but what sort of friend would pull their punches about issues as important as these?

All the best for the New Year,

Alex Callinicos

[1] A very good analysis of this dynamic has just appeared in the latest issue of International Socialism: A. Alexander and S. Assaf, 'Iraq: The Rise of the Resistance'.

[2] 'A Fight for Shiites', Washington Post, 26 November 2004.

[3] 'City of Ghosts'. Guardian, 11 January 2005.

[4] 'Army Blames Iraq for Drop in Recruits', Observer, 19 December 2004.

[5] 'Our Illiberal Elite', Observer, 9 January 2005.