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Iraq

Occupation and resistance

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Terry Conway from International Viewpoint spoke to Gilbert Achcar on May 2, 2003 in London.

TC: *More than two weeks after the end of the shooting war, US troops are still killing Iraqis every day. Could you draw out some of the main elements of what you think is happening on the ground in Iraq?*

GA: I would say that what's going on illustrates what many people who were opposed to this war were predicting - that the easiest part of it would be the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

Washington and London were peddling a myth that not only would it be a cakewalk in terms of the war itself, but also in terms of the control of the country afterwards. They were betting on what their people in the Iraqi opposition made them believe - and what they wanted to believe anyhow - that the great majority of the Iraqi people would greet them.

I also think they were betting on the quick collapse of just the central apparatus so that they could use the Iraqi state apparatus in order to implement what some people before the war were already calling Saddamism without Saddam.

But what actually happened was something that was predictable - and was predicted - in such a very centralised and despotic regime; when the central figure vanishes, the whole thing collapses just like a house of cards. You get a sort of chain reaction. At the moment that Saddam Hussein disappeared, this is exactly what happened.

Some people were misled by the extent of the resistance at the beginning, which was minimal but contrasted sharply nevertheless with the experience of 1991. This was because this time the offensive was carried out under very different conditions. The ground offensive started immediately rather than after five and a half weeks of relentless bombing. Therefore this time there was still some ability for the grassroots elements of the apparatus to fight back as long as the central apparatus was there. But as soon as Saddam Hussein vanished, all that collapsed very quickly.

That is the normal thing with such a regime based on fear and which is the object of hatred from the overwhelming majority of the people. Obviously the regime had its own constituency, but it was a minority of the Iraqi population.

This collapse created a vacuum into which political forces of the opposition - the real opposition, not the Washington puppet opposition - intervene to fill it. There are all kinds of groupings involved, but the most important are the Shiite Islamic forces - with various degrees of fundamentalism among them. These are forces that are definitely not controlled by Washington.

On the other hand the enthusiastic reception for US and British forces did not occur, even in the south where the population is very violently opposed to Saddam Hussein. The population and the religious apparatus took what was, at best, a neutral position. They said "OK, we definitely welcome the prospect of getting rid of Saddam Hussein, so we won't do anything to prevent you guys from achieving it. On the other hand we are definitely not in favour of you staying in the country".

Everything that is happening now makes this clear. Day after day those so-called liberation forces are appearing for what they are - forces of occupation. This is a foreign occupation.

We now have the second major foreign occupation in the Middle East after the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. Each day it is more apparent that they are both part of the same system of domination and are resented as such.

Therefore I think that major difficulties for Washington and London lie ahead rather than behind us.

One result of this is that they are starting to consider some so-called multilateral solutions for the control of Iraq such as NATO. I wouldn't be surprised if Donald Rumsfeld on his last trip to the area has also discussed the possibility of Arab troops helping in controlling the situation.

As the situation worsens Washington and London will be looking for alternatives to their own direct occupation of the country. It would anyway be hugely difficult for them to maintain it in the long term. What Washington is considering is to maintain military bases in the country for the long term but outside of the populated areas. They definitely don't want to remain in the cities.

They have the experience of Beirut in their minds. When the Israeli army invaded Beirut, it quickly turned into a nightmare and they had to evacuate the city very soon. Their presence there led to the start of action by the resistance, by snipers and this panicked the Israelis.

We are already witnessing the unfolding of a resistance movement in Iraq. It is interesting that it is different from Beirut - because in Lebanon there was a popular defeat but this is not the case in Iraq. The Iraqis don't consider themselves defeated. Therefore there are reasons for more optimism in terms of the fate of the occupation than we had in Lebanon. In Beirut, when the Israelis invaded, they defeated a strong popular resistance. So the demoralisation was enormous at the beginning. Despite that, after two weeks you had the beginning of resistance actions and they had to leave the country.

Today, major segments of the Iraqi population do not consider themselves defeated, but consider Saddam Hussein defeated. The Shiite Islamic forces in particular consider themselves victors and so they are bold enough to organise mass demonstrations against the occupation.

What we are seeing now is demonstrations of both Sunnis and Shias and there is no religious rift. You have just as strong a demand for the end of the occupation amongst the Shia as amongst the Sunnis in some cities such as Mosul, Falluja - cities where the US troops have killed people demonstrating against the occupation. Washington is in danger of getting bogged down in a real quagmire there: that is why they are very busy considering what possible solutions they can find to prevent this.

TC: *When you talk about the different political forces amongst the Shia, you talked about different degrees of fundamentalism. Standing back for a minute, what does the development of the anti-war movement and the resistance to occupation mean for the balance of forces between fundamentalists and a secular alternative? Clearly we are not talking about a return to Nasserism - the material conditions don't exist for that - but slogans for national liberation are being raised in a different way than they were in 1991 - and perhaps in a different way than they have been since Lebanon. What do you think about this?*

GA: Well, nationalist forces as such, distinguished from left wing forces, are rather negligible amongst the Arabs in Iraq today. Obviously amongst the Kurds they are very strong - and by the way pursuing very disastrous political options (again) - and allying with, or appearing as being in alliance with, the occupation.

In terms of the Arab population, there are some left wing forces. The Iraqi Communist Party has resurfaced - it has managed to maintain some members in the country, though in a clandestine manner of operation. It had the political sense to be the first to produce a newspaper and organised a means of getting it printed and distributed. It also organised some demonstrations and opened headquarters.

I'm sure that among the now dozens of political groups that are mushrooming in the country there are others that are left wing. But one should not fool oneself - the left is no match presently for the Islamic forces especially in terms of mass mobilizations. Obviously as progressive, left wing people, we should do what we can to support the left in Iraq. But we should also be absolutely clear that it is up to the Iraqi people to decide freely what sort of government and regime they want to represent them.

It is definitely not the right of Washington to proscribe to them the kind of regime they should get. It's certainly not for Donald Rumsfeld to say, as he did recently, that an Islamic regime on the Iranian model would not be acceptable. The right of self-determination for the Iraqi people involves their right to choose what sort of regime they want. We should not allow any insidious campaign on the theme that US and British troops are stationed in the country so as to prevent a so-called totalitarian regime. We should remind any sincere democratic person who might fall for this that anyway the Iranian fundamentalist regime is definitely much less despotic, in relative terms, and much less anti-women than the closest ally to Washington in the region - the Saudi kingdom.

These people who have legitimated the invasion in the name of overthrowing a dictatorship, now try to legitimate their continued occupation of the country, in the name of preventing another dictatorship. We want nothing to do with this. We do not accept their hypocrisy. We need to launch a campaign with the central slogan for the immediate, unconditional withdrawal of US and British troops from Iraq, free elections without such troops or outside interference.

TC: *Mentioning the relationship between Washington and Saudi Arabia, what lies behind the fact the US is withdrawing troops from there and moving to Qatar?*

GA: They have moved the central co-ordination of their operations to Qatar. They have built a new base there - which, as in all these cases, is subsidised by the local potentate.

TC: *And therefore the local population...*

GA: Yes in the end. This is also a confirmation of what some of us have been arguing for a long time against those who said that the war was another way that Washington could exert more pressure on the Saudis, bring them to their knees and transform the regime. On the contrary, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein gave them an excuse to withdraw the troops from Saudi Arabia, because those troops had become a liability for their Saudi cronies.

Everyone knows now that Bin Laden's turn against his former sponsor and ally in Washington was due to the deployment of US troops in the Saudi kingdom. That has been a major argument for agitation against the US amongst the population there. It explains why 15 out of 19 of the 9/11 hijackers were people coming from the Saudi kingdom, Saudi subjects - I don't call them Saudi citizens because there are none.

The presence of US troops had become a political liability that was very much increased, aside from Bin Laden's agitation, by an issue that I point to in my book, which is the women's issue.

Due to the women's movement in the US, the US government was not able to send only male troops to Saudi Arabia.

They attempted to impose ways of dressing and behaving - like not driving a car - on women soldiers which they wanted to do so as not to be too out of step, too shocking to the local ultra-sexist customs. And that became a real problem for the Pentagon. There was a woman pilot who sued the Pentagon over that and she won the case in court. So they were put in a situation where they would have eventually to accept women soldiers behaving normally, that is in such a way that it would have increased tremendously the problems for the Saudi regime.

So now that they have overthrown Saddam Hussein, they don't need to keep troops in the Saudi kingdom to protect it from any immediate foreign threat because there is no such credible external threat any longer.

TC: *No, the main threat is internal...*

GA: And US troops make it worse. Anyway they are not troops for internal repression - they are mostly air force people, who were monitoring the 'no fly' zone in southern Iraq which doesn't exist any longer. In the same way that Washington initially deployed their troops to protect the Saudi regime, now they are withdrawing their troops to preserve the same Saudi regime. That is their main concern and all this talk about so-called democracy is pure mystification.

We can see that Iraq is just a terrible proof or further illustration of that famous law that really free elections in the Middle East will only produce governments hostile to the United States. Therefore the US government allies can only be despotic governments - involving perhaps some very cosmetic reforms. Basically what Washington is trying to consolidate in the area is a Pax Americana based on US-controlled despotic governments.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/16fp.jpg>]

TC: *It seems to me that the third leg of what they are doing, and in some ways the most horrendous, is the so-called road map in Palestine.*

GA: In a sense we have a repeat of the 1991 scenario. This war has been the second major step in securing total US hegemony over the Arab Middle East. I don't need to elaborate the reasons for their interest in the area, which are obviously linked to the fact that this is the area with over 2/3 of the oil reserves of the planet. So it's of huge importance.

In order to have a complete Pax Americana, in order to consolidate the advances in their hegemony, they want to defuse the Israeli/Palestinian issue which has been the main, though not the only, source of anti-US resentment in the whole Muslim world. So they need to find something resembling a settlement.

And that is why in 1991, under 'George the First', a few months after the Gulf War, they started the Madrid conference. That involved exerting real pressure on Yitzhak Shamir, who was the Israeli Prime Minister at the time. Shamir, as the head of the right wing Likud party, did not want a settlement.

The hawks in Likud don't want any concessions to the Palestinians. So 'George the First' had to exert real pressure on Shamir through economic means in order to get him to join the Madrid so-called peace process that started at the end of October 1991.

Now we have a repetition of this scenario. The US have achieved a second and even more decisive control of the whole region through getting control of Iraq after years of containing that country. And now they need, in the same way that they needed in 1991, to stabilise and consolidate what they achieved. That means that they need to defuse this Israeli/ Palestinian question. This is being pushed by Blair and by certain sections of the US ruling class who are

saying: "come on, we don't want to lose what we have just won over this, this is the necessary price to pay."

It means two things: in order to move forward in the Pax Americana, they needed first of all to replace the Palestinian partner in this process. They reached this conclusion at Camp David in July 2000, when they faced a deadlock in the negotiations and Arafat could not be convinced to accept the dictates of Barak and Clinton. He could not be convinced - and he said so himself repeatedly - because he would lose his head since his people would be absolutely and violently against such a move.

So after the failure of this last attempt of the Clinton administration, both the US and the Israeli administration reached the conclusion that they had to quell the resistance of the Palestinian people with planes, tanks and bulldozers. If Arafat wouldn't play ball they would have to remove him.

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So this offensive was launched, first under Barak, with the provocation by Sharon at the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem in September 2000 which started the so-called Second Intifada. Barak had already increased the repression to a qualitatively new scale. Sharon took this further after he won the election in Feb 2001. In a sense Sharon's victory reflected the fact that the Israeli establishment wanted someone who was able to implement the harshest methods against the Palestinians. And Sharon did so in a coalition with Shimon Peres and the Labourites until recently. So this consensus expressed the desire of the Israeli establishment and all its tendencies to break the bones of the Palestinians. And to a great extent they achieved it. The US came to the conclusion some months ago that they had to complete the process by having someone other than Arafat and so they imposed this designation of a Prime Minister along with a man of their choice in charge of internal security.

So on the Palestinian side, they had put together the key prerequisites for moving forward in this so-called peace process. And so what remains is the Israelis.

And it is obvious to me that Sharon is not really willing to deliver. He cannot openly reject all the US demands but he is acting tactically - incidentally just as Shamir did before him in 1991. When Shamir went to Madrid he maintained such a stubborn and intransigent position that it all failed and then they had to go for the Oslo accords - which was after having Rabin and Peres in the Israeli government rather than Shamir. So I think - given what Sharon is - that it is not unlikely that we see some tension arising between the Bush administration and Sharon.

To what extent this is the case will also depend on the tactical ability of Sharon. I think he will try to gain time, betting on the fact that next year is election year for Bush. So he will temporise and practice obstructionism - it's a classic tactic - putting all kind of conditions and so forth so the Bush administration will be faced with the dilemma between exerting strong pressure - as 'George I' did - or not.

I don't exclude that as a possibility - just because, contrarily to what some people believe, the tail doesn't wag the dog. It's not Israel that drives US foreign policy - Israel is just a strategic asset for the US. US foreign policy is driven by US capitalist and imperialist strategic interests.

These require a settlement now and it can only come to fruition if they revert to something like the Barak-Clinton model of 2000, which was rejected by Arafat. But this is unacceptable - utterly unacceptable to Ariel Sharon. So we will see.

It also depends on the situation in Iraq - because if the situation there becomes very troubling for the US they won't be in a position to exert very strong pressure on Sharon. If they succeed in stabilising control over Iraq, then they will need a settlement and then they will move to exert strong pressure on Israel. If they don't - Iraq, rather than

Israel/Palestine, will remain their main preoccupation.

TC: *I'm taking for granted that there is unlikely to be another major military campaign by the US in the next 6-9 months.*

GA: No I don't think it is likely that there will be such a campaign before the next US elections. That's extremely unlikely. It would be tremendously risky and costly both in economic and the whole of Iraq, which is a hugely difficult task. They are definitely not in a position to tackle North Korea or Iran, or Syria or any major issue of this kind. It's not on the agenda now and, for Britain at least, they said themselves that the armed forces are exhausted...

TC: *And broke.*

GA: Yes, exactly. So I don't think Washington is planning anything. Obviously if it is an emergency situation arising from something unexpected such as Iranian troops massed on the border - then they would defend their interests. But they won't take the initiative of launching a campaign of aggression in the short term - aside from possible limited strikes.

TC: *Given that scenario, what do you think the anti-war movement should be focusing on over the months ahead, and how easy do you think it is going to be to transform a movement launched to stop a war, then campaigning to end a war, into one demanding an end to occupation?*

GA: I think the movement has already responded to what is the central need of the period by switching slogans from "No blood for oil" into "No blood for Empire". I believe this is a good description of what is needed - which is not only to transform the movement against the war on Iraq into a general anti-war movement but also to transform it into an anti-imperialist movement because that is what is at stake. And I think this should even have been more centrally the focus while the war in Iraq was going on.

I was one of the people who argued that, due to the fact that this war would be launched before April, for climatic reasons, and given the fact that only the mass movement in the US would be decisive enough to stop Washington - especially in the light of what is at stake in the Gulf - there was no realistic prospect within this timetable to prevent the war from taking place. To be sure, the movement had to be built with the idea, yes, of trying to prevent it; but in any case, the aim should have been that, if the aggression happened, the political costs would be as high as possible for the warmongers. In this sense the recent electoral setback for Blair in Britain is a good first result. Secondly, it was necessary to wage the campaign while explaining that this is not a mobilisation against just this war, but against a whole pattern of domination involving war as its central axis - a pattern which has been dramatically escalated after 9/11. We have had the Afghan war, the Iraq war - and we are also having low-intensity interventions in the Philippines, in Georgia, in Colombia, aside from the pressure and threats against the countries designated in Washington as 'rogue states'. So it is a whole pattern, and this is what we should be building the campaign against; and the only way to do this is as an anti-imperialist campaign. This aspect of the campaign should be deepened and developed as the necessary corollary of the movement against neoliberal globalization - in the same way, actually, that militarism and imperialist wars are a necessary corollary of neo-liberalism on a world scale.