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Interview

# Imperialism, the Arab Spring, and the crisis

- Features -

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**David Barsamian interviewed the well-known anti-imperialist writer and broadcaster Tariq Ali in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on October 26, 2011 for *International Socialist Review*.**

**DB: The revolts in the Arab Middle East, beginning in Tunisia in December of 2010, seemingly took the world by surprise. But before we talk about what's happened in the last year, set the historical context of the postcolonial Arab states.**

**TA:** Essentially what happened in the Arab world after the Second World War was that the weakening of the British and French empires made it very difficult for them to exercise any real control. So it was only a question of time. Saudi Arabia had already been sorted out during the Second World War itself, when Roosevelt and the American government took charge of the kingdom without a word of thank you to the British. Saudi Arabia was then safe with the United States and has remained so till today. In Egypt, Iraq—let's take these two countries to start with—we had European empires still exercising an influence, British troops present, the Suez Canal owned by the West. And then we had the beginning of a set of revolutions, often led by the military but supported by a large section of the population.

The toppling of King Farouk in Egypt in 1952 by Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Free Officers transformed that country. It wouldn't have transformed it had Nasser not decided to nationalize the Suez Canal. That was the key decision that he took in the interests of his country. By taking that decision, he slapped the face of the European empires, which is why the United States was not that concerned with it. Washington was not directly affected. The British response to the nationalization of the Suez Canal was to prepare an invasion of Egypt. Britain, France, and Israel—the dilapidated British lion, helped by the French fox and the Israeli skunk—launched a three-part attack on Egypt in 1956. And the entire Arab world gasped.

The Egyptians, of course, fought back, but the key player—and one has to recognize this—was the United States. They had not been asked permission before this happened. It was a critical moment in the Cold War. They didn't want Nasser to fall into the arms of the Soviet Union, and they thought that the British and French were driving him in that direction. That was the last time the British and the French ever did anything major without asking the permission of the US.

So the Suez invasion created the birth of Arab nationalism at the same time it marked the total end of the British Empire. Africa was yet to be given its independence, but that came to an end. Nasser, of course, treated the triumph in Egypt—the Suez Canal remained under Egyptian control—as a lesson for the Arabs that this is the way you go forward: You fight, you take actions. And a huge nationalist wave engulfed that world. There were times when people felt that we could have a common Arab nation with three concurrent capitals—Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad.

In 1958 there was a revolution in Iraq and the pro-British regime was wiped out. The king and his horrific uncle, the crown prince, were publicly hanged. In Egypt the monarchy had been overthrown. So the crown heads of the Arab world were shaking, tottering. It was an incredible mood, which I remember well as a young person growing up at the time. We were excited by it. Then what happened is, of course, the Israelis were now central to US strategy. They didn't want to use the European powers. The Americans were then in Saudi Arabia themselves and more or less in the Gulf, though not to the extent to which they are now. The Israelis became the central players on behalf of the US.

The 1967 war was decisive for a number of reasons. The defeat inflicted by the Israeli army on the Egyptians and the Syrians marked the end of the nationalist phase in Arab politics. It never recovered from that. Israel was backed by

the West, particularly by the United States. And the US, impressed by the skill and ease with which the Israelis had punished Arab nationalism, became friends for life. It was 1967, not 1948. 1948 was important for the formation of Israel, backed by the US and Britain; but it's not until 1967 that the United States really embraced Israel. And from then on it was "my house is your house" between these two state powers.

Nasser died soon afterwards, and by the early 1970s the US was pushing Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, to be a big boy and do the deal with Israel. Because they felt that Egypt, as the most important and most powerful state both in terms of population and military force, was needed in order to end this confrontation with Israel. So the Israeli-Egyptian peace accord was signed. Of course, both these rogues, Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin, got the Nobel Peace Prize—hardly a surprise. It was the Israeli prime minister, Golda Meir, who made a memorable remark at that time when she was asked, "What do you think of these two guys getting the Peace Prize?" She said, "It's the wrong prize. They deserved an Oscar," because they acted so well.

I think what we saw with the emergence of the Sadat government was a total capitulation to Israel in terms of foreign policy—it was a humiliating peace treaty for Egypt, saying that its armies couldn't move freely within Egyptian borders without the Israelis being informed beforehand; and it meant the abandonment of the Palestinians by the Egyptian state. And thirdly, it meant for Egypt now entering the embrace not just of Israel but also of the West. So all of the progressive reforms of Nasser were dismantled.

By the 1980s, the process of privatization and the removal of the social safety net, which we are now very familiar with, had begun. Islamist groups were used by Sadat to victimize, repress, and destroy the nationalist presence on the campuses. Quite horrible stories came out at that time. They created what became the Egypt we know till the uprising: rock-solid, hard dictatorship based on repression. But the peace treaty split Sadat's supporters within the Islamist ranks, and the group which finally bumped him off cited that as a key reason why they had bumped him off.

His death was not as unpopular as was painted in the Western press, despite the people who carried it out. Many Egyptians said, "Thank God this has happened." Mubarak was present when Sadat was killed, but he was very quick to escape harm by hiding under a table on the reviewing stand. He saved his life and he succeeded Sadat, and he moderated things a tiny bit. But within a few years he was back on track doing exactly the same things and being far more repressive than even Sadat had been.

And so we saw the emergence of this dictatorship, which became more and more moth-eaten, but had to rely largely on repression to maintain order, and on American largesse—billions in aid, so-called, which went mostly to the military and the elite—in order to stay in power. So that was the combination that did it. We know that for the last ten years that tensions had been building, first with the Islamists. Mubarak applied a double-edged policy with them: Don't challenge me frontally on the political domain, and I'll make lots of concessions to you culturally. And that is what he did, which actually made them stronger.

And they didn't challenge him politically. I remember—I was in Cairo in 2002 meeting a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, who was a doctor, in his clinic because the Brotherhood was illegal. I said, "What are you guys going to do when the Americans invade Iraq?" And he said, "Brother Tariq, let me tell you this. The gates of hell will open." I said, "I look forward to it, because you could actually play a very big part. If Egypt goes up, it will be difficult." "Don't you worry," he said. Of course, when Iraq was invaded, nothing happened. No gates opened up of hell or heaven or anything else. We saw very little opposition in that country.

The Brotherhood was repressed—many of its militants were tortured—but less and less. Largely, Mubarak threatened them because he knew a lot of Muslim Brotherhood supporters were businessmen. So every time they did something he didn't like, he would say, "OK, we'll take all your licenses away." So immediately a section of the Brotherhood leadership would fall back into line. The young who were being recruited were more militant.

But what we are talking about now is basically the only serious political organization that existed in Egypt in these years, because a huge vacuum had been created by the destruction of the nationalists. They were beaten, they had their tail between their legs. They were there, but they did very little. It was the Brotherhood that had a presence when the uprising happened. And what joyous days they were, when the young people poured out onto the streets of Cairo and Alexandria and Suez, just challenging the regime on every front and throwing each ball back into its own court. If you want to repress us, you will have to use the army.

At the same time, the demonstrators, their young faces filled with hope, were fraternizing with the Egyptian military, embracing soldiers and officers, making it very difficult for them to turn the tanks on them. So the combination of this actually led to the toppling of the despot. The Americans finally realized they couldn't keep him in power. Though they tried very hard. Hillary Clinton stated in public, "Mubarak has been a loyal friend. Why, Bill and I regard him as family." Well, of course you do, but the Egyptian people never regarded him as family. Never was this disjuncture between US backed despots in the Arab world and the bulk of the people so clear as in the streets of Egypt in those months. They were really days of joy.

**DB: One of the major events in the Arab Middle East takes place in 1969, when Colonel Muammar Qaddafi overthrows the monarchy of King Idris, and kicks the United States out of Wheeler Air Force Base, located near Tripoli. Libya becomes, as in Iraq with Saddam Hussein and in Syria with Assad, a national security state built around the great leader, fossilizing, concentrating wealth, corruption. The story is well known. He meets his end in 2011. You were very critical of the NATO intervention in Libya. You called it "vigilantism." How do you see in retrospect the rationale that was created by the Obama administration under the rubric of "responsibility to protect"?**

**TA:** The "Responsibility to protect" has probably led to more deaths than the number of people they were protecting in Benghazi, as they were saying. We have had over six months of continuous bombing of Libyan cities; Tripoli, Sirte, Misrata, others. Very few images of these bombed cities have been permitted onto the television screens. Unlike in Iraq, where they were showing how strong they were, even that amount of coverage, Al Jazeera didn't do it because their government was backing the NATO invasion. So Al Jazeera's coverage was totally pro-war, and it has declined considerably. So one can't just attack the Western media. The one independent television station we had is in its death throes as a result of this.

To come back to your central point. Six months of bombing. And they're saying there were hardly any casualties? I don't believe it. I was speaking to someone who shall be nameless, who is well informed and linked to people who do know these things in Britain, and I said, "How many people have you guys killed? About 40,000, 50,000?" He said, "No, not that many." I said, "How many? Give me a rough estimate." He said, "Probably 20,000."

Now, it could be 20, it could be 30, because the notion that this is precision bombing is just nonsense. They can't even do that with their drone attacks in Pakistan. So I would say that is probably the case, though I hasten to add that we have no proof of this so far. Very little reporting has been done. The journalists were mainly embedded. No one actually sent in the reports that we saw during the Iraq War, both through Al Jazeera and through Robert Fisk and others. So we haven't had that in this particular war.

So if this is the case, that they've killed 20,000 to 30,000 people, then what does it show? It shows total, pure cynicism. Essentially why they went into Libya, the Euro-American complement of NATO, was to take it. They had been negotiating with Qaddafi for the last ten to twelve years to bring him into the fold. They had brought him into the fold. Condoleezza Rice publicly stated that Qaddafi was a model for the Arab world as a modernist dictator.

Tony Blair fell into his arms. A lot of money exchanged hands. That is always the case with Blair: nothing is free. The British media began to extol this guy as a statesman. There were all sorts of other things: The London School of

Economics was funded by Qaddafi's money. Anthony Giddens, Lord Giddens, Blair's main academic henchman, went to Tripoli, meeting Qaddafi, reading Qaddafi's *Green Book*, and saying,

"This is very similar to what we're doing in Britain. We call it 'the third way,' and it's your third way." This was the extent of collaboration with him. When the West started to attack him, Qaddafi's son gave a press conference and said, "We funded Sarkozy's election campaign." It could well be true. This was the degree of collaboration between these people. And suddenly he becomes a monster because there's an uprising against him? Give me a break.

Essentially, I think they took Libya to win it as a market for investments, for the oil. Libyan oil is of very good quality, produced at very cheap cost—wreck the Libyan coast with tourist hotels, take their business there. That's why they did it, just to get rid of a guy who was dragging his feet, even though he agreed to do it.

And, of course, he humiliated them by arriving in Paris and Rome and saying he wanted to set up his stupid tent in the middle of the city, just making fun of the Western leaders, because he was slightly eccentric. Unlike Saddam and Assad, who were brutes, but they were not eccentric. Qaddafi always had an eccentric side to him. He was very poorly educated. He was twenty-two when that coup took place, and worshipped Nasser of Egypt at the time. Then he soon forgot him. That is essentially what happened.

And it's not over yet, because, ironically, as we see, or perhaps not so ironically, some of the people handed over to Qaddafi to be tortured were handed over by the British and the Americans as Islamists, al-Qaeda, all that. One of these guys is commanding the Tripoli militia today, and he's demanding a public apology from the British for having tortured him themselves and then handing him over to Qaddafi. So I think this one isn't totally played out.

And I think those people who got very excited and said, "This is the first NATO intervention which we can support because it's genuinely humanitarian," have to answer questions about the civilian casualties and about what is going to happen to Libya. You know my position on this. I have always said, however horrible it is, it is better that these overthrows are organic, that they take place internally. Sometimes it's a long struggle and lives are lost, but lives are not saved by Western military intervention.

I said that in Kosovo during the war on Yugoslavia, and my position hasn't changed on that. For many sort of leftists and former leftists now saying, "This was an intervention we can support," you feel they're desperate to come into the fold. We've seen people like that before. I thought the Iraq War would have disabused them, because all the same arguments could be used to justify the war on Iraq as they're using against Qaddafi, except that Saddam wasn't doing these things at the time he was attacked. The images of Qaddafi coming out of Libya helped enormously.

One person I know and quite like, a writer, said, "You know, if there had been images like that coming out of Iraq before the Iraq War, I would probably have supported the war." People don't even know what they are saying. And they have stopped thinking in serious categories. So humanism, humanitarianism becomes the only serious category, which means they've lost faith in themselves and abandoned their own intellects, many of these people. So I have no problems with the position I took on the war. I think it was completely justified, as we shall see.

And what are they going to do if the Islamists in Libya now come to power? I have no problems with that. Better them than some unrepresentative person. That's the way people will learn—from their own experiences. In Tunisia, in Libya, in Egypt, you have Islamists in power? Fine. Do business with them, see what they're like. If the people there don't like them, they will push them aside, form something new. It's always the best way. But the West might not be so sanguine.

**DB: In fact, in neighboring Tunisia in late October 2011, what's described as a moderate Islamist formation**

won the election.

**TA:** Exactly. The Turkish Islamists, NATO's favorite Islamists, won the Turkish elections years ago and are now a pillar of the so-called international community, i.e., supported by the State Department. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the bulk of it will do a deal.

We know what's going on behind the scenes is three-way discussions between the United States, the Brotherhood, and the Egyptian army to work out some compromise settlement. In Tunisia, Ghannouchi's party has won the elections, and we will see. When he was in Britain in exile he was saying that he believed in social justice and all this sort of stuff, so we'll see whether they do anything socially beneficial to their people or just open the country up to more investment.

So essentially you have the same regime but with a democratic side to it. Which is not unimportant. When you create a vacuum, that's when the Islamists come. Someone fills the vacuum. The left can't do it. The progressive forces don't exist or are demoralized or are backing the US in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan. So the Islamists seem to be the only serious opposition party. We will see. In Tunisia a few leftists have been elected to parliament as well, I gather, so we'll see what they do and what they can do.

**DB:** This term, "responsibility to protect," is applied quite selectively. Obviously, some citizens of the world are more privileged than other citizens. Clearly, Kashmiris, who are living in Indian-administered Kashmir, who have died in the many, many thousands—the actual figure is 70,000 since an uprising there in 1989—do not fall under this category of "responsibility to protect." Britain, France, and the United States are not very exercised about what's happening to that particular population.

**TA:** The west basically doesn't care a damn about Kashmir. It's been a brutal intervention by the Indians, much, much worse, let me add, in terms of numbers killed than anything the Chinese have done in Tibet. That's the comparison. The minute there's trouble in Tibet, the whole Western media is up in arms and all the Buddhists in Hollywood start making movies. When the Indians carry out repression on a huge scale in Kashmir, much worse than Tibet—silence.

So the logic, I think, of this, is that if a country is formally democratic, it can do whatever it wants. But if it's not democratic, then we can use the fact that it's not democratic as a weapon against it. Otherwise there's nothing. People are people. The US and its allies have occupied Iraq. They say they're about to leave. Good. Good riddance. But they've occupied Iraq and over a million people have died. Who is going to be charged with those war crimes? Bush, Cheney, Blair, Aznar? They should be before some court as war criminals. No one will charge them.

So double standards are part of the world we live in. And the reason for that is that in the thinking of the majority of countries of the world, the only truly sovereign country is the United States of America. American sovereignty is determined by the US, but certainly Europe and the Middle East countries' sovereignty is also determined by the US. That's the big difference. So they all fall into line whenever the United States says this has to be done, that has to be done.

The Germans sometimes don't. They don't send troops, but then they fall into line later. The Germans refused to fight in Iraq, they refused to fight in Libya. They sent troops to Afghanistan, which created a huge debate within the German elite. They don't do it, but they don't oppose it either. So the only real sovereign nation today in the world is the imperial nation. The Chinese are sovereign, but that's in their own region, and economically. They never challenge the US militarily either.

The first time they did it recently was to oppose sanctions against Syria in the UN Security Council. And the reason for that is that both the Russians and the Chinese feel they were tricked into supporting the UNSC resolution on Libya because they said this would be a limited exercise, just utilized to prevent Qaddafi from bombing Benghazi. That's why we supported it. These people are misusing it, so we're not supporting it. But that's the first sign of some rift, and I don't think that's too serious either.

**DB: Indeed, a no-fly zone quickly became regime change in terms of policy. Talk about the evolving role of NATO. Some have said it has become a military arm of the empire, of Washington.**

**TA:** It is. NATO never fought a single war during the Cold War, when it was created to combat the so-called Soviet threat to Western Europe. It never fought. But since the collapse of communism and the death of the Soviet Union, NATO has suddenly become very active. And I think its function is as one of the possible means for the US to change a regime or get its way in the world. I can't remember which American official it was, but he was very blunt about it. He said, "We're not that bothered. If we can use the UN, we'll use the UN. If we can't use the UN, we'll use NATO. If we can't use NATO, we'll go in ourselves."

In Iraq they couldn't use the UN or NATO, so they went in themselves with the coalition of the willing. And that was that. One can't take these institutions too seriously. All these institutions—military, international, financial—are by and large institutions that are created by and respond to the United States. That is just a fact of life. When people tell me the American empire is weakening, I say, "Well, it is in some ways economically, but its military and institutional stranglehold remains quite strong. Don't underestimate that."

**DB: Talk about your native Pakistan, which seems to careen from one disaster and catastrophe to another—floods, internal violence, and poverty on a massive scale. Years ago you wrote a book *Can Pakistan Survive?* As a state it has shown some resilience in terms of staying power. But how much pounding can the population take?**

**TA:** The state of Pakistan now makes me weep. I have analyzed it, I have written about it, I have done three books on it, and I have written numerous essays on it. I sometimes feel there's very little left to say.

One has said it all, and just repeating oneself, what good is it going to do? What do we have in this country? Natural catastrophes are one thing—earthquakes, floods. Every country can suffer from them. We have man-made catastrophes in Pakistan. The army is one problem, which has never let that country grow up in peace by taking over, again, on the instructions of the US, at critical moments in the country's history. Every single coup was greenlighted by the United States.

**DB: Ayub Khan, Zia ul-Haq.**

**TA:** Ayub Khan took power in 1958 because he and the Americans felt that if the country's first general election was permitted in April 1959, parties that wanted to pull Pakistan out of the security pacts into which this elite had taken them might take them out of the pacts, because Nehru's [1] nonalignment and neutrality was popular. So they said best not to permit an election. Do it. Then in 1977, Bhutto took power. [2] The first martial law ultimately led to the breakup of the country in 1971, with East Pakistan becoming Bangladesh.

Then we had General Zia's coup d'état, which in some ways was equally damaging. Ayub broke up Pakistan, and General Zia totally destroyed the political fabric and culture of Pakistan by instituting public floggings, public hangings, executing the country's last elected prime minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto; and doing all this with a cover of Islamism, Islamic laws, and women's rights being taken away. An ugly atmosphere built up in the country, from which

it is still suffering.

All that was tolerated because General Zia had become an indispensable ally in the war against the Russians in Afghanistan. One reason for the Americans not doing anything to save Bhutto's life was because he had basically refused to stop building the nuclear bomb. Kissinger warned him, "If you don't desist, we will make a terrible example out of you." And Bhutto replied in kind. But that's what they did: They made a terrible example out of him.

But then General Zia, their favored successor, was the one who completed Bhutto's work and built the bomb. Because what the United States failed to perceive was that whoever was running the country, once India had nuclear weapons, no section of the Pakistani military elite was going to say don't do it. So Zia, with the Americans turning a blind eye, built the nuclear weapons just as he was helping them in Afghanistan to defeat the Russians. I wrote *Can Pakistan Survive?* It did have a question mark.

But I noted in that book in 1984 all the symptoms of Pakistani collapse. They're still there. But what is keeping them together, the spinal cord of the Pakistani state is now a military with nuclear weapons. That makes it very difficult to destroy the country. The US still could, if they wanted to, but the price would be high, very high. The United States does not know where all the nuclear weapons are. They think they do. Some of them have been hidden in areas which are known to only a very few trusted people.

That's an ongoing situation. Meanwhile, we have a so-called democracy with a politician in power, Asif Ali Zardari is the widower of Benazir Bhutto, who was killed fighting an election campaign. And in characteristic South Asian fashion, except she was more blatant about it, she said that "I leave my party to the care of my son and, until he comes of age, my husband." This is sort of a medieval practice, going back to the days of the monarchies of old. Even then, the Mughal emperors usually avoided specifying which kid would succeed them because they didn't want to have a civil war on their hands, though sometimes they did. She was very specific. So the so-called "princess of democracy," as American papers called her, actually bequeathed her party to the family.

The party became a family heirloom. Zardari, to be fair to him, has never made a secret of the fact that his only interest in politics is making money. And as president of Pakistan you can make more money than you could if you're the husband of the prime minister or a minister, though he did make a lot in the years when Benazir was in power. So we have a president who is probably one of the most corrupt leaders in the world—though there's a lot of competition in these matters. And there are hundreds of stories from every quarter on how he makes money.

When the 2010 floods took place, immediately Zardari's sister appealed to Karachi businessmen saying, "We're setting up an appeal in the name of the Bhutto children. Donate to the Bhutto fund." The businessmen, for once, one after the other, stood up and said, "You tell us what is needed. Cement? Rice? Clothes? Medicine? You give us the locations where they are needed. We will buy them and make them available to the people who are suffering. We're not going to put them in any fund." A public rebuff. She walked out of that meeting. Everyone knows what's going on.

People are helpless, and conditions get worse and worse. On one border in the northern flank of the country we have the Afghanistan war. We have the war spilling over into Pakistan, as I predicted in October 2001 was going to happen. We have the military creating trouble in Balochistan and the Baloch leaders going to the American embassy and pleading for support to create an independent Balochistan. Both sides are just completely bankrupt. And then we have the drone attacks on Pakistan—in Obama's two and a half years in office, there have been more drone attacks than in Bush's entire term of office.

**DB: Do you see any parallels between the rhetoric Washington is leveling against Pakistan and what they were saying about Cambodia in the 1960s? That Cambodia was a safe haven, a sanctuary, thus making it**

**impossible for the United States to achieve victory in Vietnam. Cross-border raids were launched, and ultimately a full-scale invasion took place in early 1970. There have been bellicose messages coming from the State Department as well as the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that Pakistan is playing a double game, harboring the Haqqani network and indirectly supporting the Taliban. What are the prospects of a US invasion of Pakistan?**

**TA:** I think they are very low. And the reason for that is that the American military will not want to get bogged down in another country. Pakistan isn't a small country. Afghanistan has a population of 26 million. Pakistan has a population approaching, if it hasn't already reached, 200 million.

You invade a country like Pakistan and you have a huge confrontation on your hands. So I don't think the Pentagon is going to permit that, just as the Pentagon has been very hostile to any bombing raids on Iran. Don't forget how bellicose the US has been and how recently they tried to use this totally absurd manufactured incident. Obama himself comes on the air to tell people we have discovered a huge plot, which is that some nutty fantasist is going to kill the Saudi ambassador, and this nutty fantasist has been employed by the Iranians?

Give us a break. Everyone in Iran was laughing. They know that if he wanted to do this, the Iranians have their own methods of carrying out these attacks, if they wish to. And why kill this little punk in the Washington embassy? Who is he? He's just an ambassador. He changes nothing. Just a provocation to try and turn up the heat on Iran. Utterly pathetic. In the case of Pakistan, of course, it is more serious for them, but they know it. It's not a surprise. They know perfectly well that the Pakistani state, for its own reasons, whether you like it or not, is not going to permit Afghanistan to be handed over to the Indians.

The Karzai puppets are desperately negotiating with India, also for troops, and Pakistani military intelligence is aware of this. So the Haqqani thing was approved not just by the ISI but also by the Pakistani military high command, because this notion that the ISI is a force unto itself is rubbish. It never was. The only period it had relative autonomy was when the Americans enlarged its size to fight the war in Afghanistan. That's the only time.

**DB: The war in the 1980s, the jihad against the Soviet Union.**

**TA:** That's the only time the ISI had a semi-autonomous role. Obviously, occasionally certain rogue officers act without permission, but by and large the ISI is a disciplined unit of the Pakistani military. So whenever people say ISI, it's a code word for not attacking the Pakistani military directly. That should be understood. So what happened was that, yes, they unleashed Haqqani's group to show Afghans, here we are in the middle of Kabul chucking bombs and firing on the American embassy and the NATO headquarters for twenty hours.

So why couldn't you stop it? That's what the annoyance was, not that it was a military threat as such. But the psychological and political effect of this was like the Vietnamese National Liberation Front taking the American embassy in 1968 during the Tet offensive, occupying it, being killed, but putting the NLF flag up on the US embassy in Saigon.

That was it. The symbolism actually meant something. This was a similar attack by very different people, but the military symbolism was not so different. That is why the anger in the United States, especially from Petraeus and others, who feel that this war can be won, and says these wars will go on forever, my children will grow up and these wars will still be going on.

Well, the Afghans don't agree with him. So the size of the insurgency has been growing. And this was Pakistan firing a shot across Karzai and the Americans' bows and saying, "Hey, guys, don't think you can ignore us in all this

hanky-panky that's going on with the Indians behind our back. We know what's going on." It was an attempt to assert their place in the post-withdrawal settlement.

**DB: You write, "The campaign to reelect Obama began in earnest on May 2, 2011, with the revenge killing of Osama bin Laden." By all accounts, al-Qaeda's operational capability is greatly diminished. Osama bin Laden himself cut a pathetic figure at the end. Here was a man, like an old Hollywood movie star, sitting around, watching his earlier roles on videos in his house in Abbottabad.**

**TA:** Al-Qaeda had ceased to be a serious threat for a long time. Let me correct that. They were never a serious threat. They were a group, maximum 2,000 people, who were determined to create trouble and hit at American symbolic institutions. Which is why they chose the Twin Towers, a symbol of US capitalism, and the Pentagon, a symbol of American military power. And that was that. I never thought they could repeat this again. This was a one-off operation, very theatrical, very dramatic. The whole world sat back and watched the images time and time again.

But this is not new. The image is new, obviously, because no one had done this form of terrorism before. But terrorists groups of different sorts, in different parts of the world, have existed for a long time. The whole point about them is that they don't believe in mass mobilizations or organizing huge numbers of people as a collective to demand something. They believe in sensational acts. The nineteenth and early twentieth-century anarchists used to knock off crowned heads of state, presidents. That's what they did. And it created a storm and there was repression and special laws were passed to catch them. This business is exactly the same.

I know people, both anarchists and Islamists, have gotten very angry with me, because I described al-Qaeda and bin Laden as Islamo-anarchists. But that's who they are. So they have done their big hit and they've never been able to repeat it. The fact that anyone taking up arms against the US, usually in occupied countries, is described as al-Qaeda is not very convincing. The franchise which was owned by bin Laden and al-Zawahiri is in a very weak state. Other people can claim the name, but essentially it's a tiny organization, much, much reduced.

**DB: Let's transition to the economic crash hammering the United States and Europe. How did we get here?**

**TA:** We got here through the big changes that were made in the 1990s, the so-called "Washington consensus," which had two sides to it. One, we no longer face any ideological threat from any part of the world. The Soviet Union has been destroyed. Its presence that posed a threat, even that presence is now gone, it doesn't exist. And the Chinese are our allies. They've been our allies for some time. They've been developing capitalism; we're investing.

They've got a huge labor force; they can produce things much cheaper than we can. So why shouldn't our firms and industries and capitalists depend on cheap Chinese labor to get cheap goods into the shops? And we will invest money to make more money. In other words, capital now is not going to be productive capital at all, but capital is going to be used for financial speculation. That is what happened to the capitalist system essentially in the turbocharged phase of globalization, which is now in huge crisis. And because, as I said to you earlier, what the US says, its acolytes do.

The US went on this path themselves, and so did the Europeans. The British were the most slavish mimics of this, and the British economy is now in serious trouble. They used to boast that in the City of London you had more freedom to do what you want without regulation, in other words, saying the City of London is the Guantánamo of world capitalism. Come here: You can get away with anything. And they did it. But many economists had been predicting that this couldn't last.

Principally among them, I have to say, Robert Brenner at the University of California wrote a huge essay in *New Left Review*, which subsequently became a book called *The Economics of Global Turbulence*, which more or less predicted that this crisis of profits was going to create very huge damage. The speculative character of finance capital in this last period of twenty to twentyfive years created a situation of casino capitalism, gambling with money. That's what happened. It essentially was the casino economy.

Throw a billion here and we might make five billion or we might lose it all. Who cares? And it's not our money anyway. It's the money of shareholders and stockholders and people who have entrusted you with mortgages, pension funds. All that money was used as capital to gamble with. And they got their come-uppance in 2008, when the Wall Street system went into deep crisis.

Here was a key moment in world history for the United States, as the leader of the capitalist world, to say, guys, okay, enough is enough. We are now going to make a change, and this state, which is bailing out the banks and the rich, can be used for other purposes, too. We're going to encourage a massive social expenditure: building works, creation of jobs, transforming the face of America by creating a public transport system, employing people to build the railways. All that could have been done.

But you had a president who came from a system which he believed in and which he wouldn't challenge. In *The Obama Syndrome* I point out Obama's life as a young Chicago senator in the Illinois Assembly, where he's telling off other African-American Democrats who are attacking the cuts being imposed in Chicago. Obama is saying to them, "We have to learn to be prudent." This is a man who has remained loyal to that caution, the prudence he talks about, for a long time. So this president, who had raised most of his money from Wall Street, who could have appointed even Krugman or Stiglitz to be the treasury secretary but appointed Geithner, this president wasn't going to do anything. Wall Street, Goldman Sachs people openly infiltrated the economic establishment under both Bush and Obama. That's the system they backed.

Essentially what they're creating is a sticking plaster to stem an enormous flow of blood coming from the brain, which is slowly hemorrhaging. They're putting a sticking plaster on it instead of at least attempting an operation to try and save the patient. The situation is now quite critical in Europe: Iceland collapsed, Ireland collapsed, Greece collapsed, Spain and Portugal are on the verge of collapse, Italy is crumbling. Six countries.

And still no change in politics or policies. You have to say that either these sons of so-and-sos are incredibly self-confident because they've seen nothing that can challenge them, or they're blinded and they're going to go under. Greece, I would say, is in a prerevolutionary situation. It probably won't happen, but that is my feeling.

People are so fed up that they want to do away with the whole bunch. And PASOK Party center-left MPs voting for this have been spat on when they've returned to their districts by people on the streets. That's the anger in Greece. So at long last you have an occupation movement growing up here, very nice, well behaved, very angry in some cases. That's tremendous.

It's not enough. Not enough to put on the pressure that's needed, if general strikes in Greece can't force these people to change course because they're so petrified. You need huge convulsions from below to really turn the tide. Hopefully, it will happen. So far it's not. Nothing else will.

But to come back to your question again, making the Chinese economy the workshop of the world, with Europe free just to borrow money, spend money, consume, that was the model. Consumption through borrowed money, debt. There are kids who will tell you, here and in Europe, the banks were chasing them. Please borrow money. You're not borrowing enough money. Take the money. And the people who did are really suffering now.

For the American economy this is a huge, huge disaster. And it's no good the Democrats saying, "Oh, the Republicans are sabotaging this." You guys had a majority in the Senate and the House for the first two years of the Obama administration. You can't blame the Republicans. Blame yourselves. Hold up the mirror to yourselves. You did exactly what the Republicans are saying. Why didn't you do different? This image of Obama as a prisoner of right-wing forces is just not credible. It's a sign that the liberals in the United States are desperate, because in their hearts they know he's been a disaster. But they can't admit it, because to admit it is to admit that they've got nothing.

**DB: Booms and busts are a regular feature of capitalism over the centuries. Is what we're witnessing now substantively different from previous busts?**

**TA:** No, and I would warn against any notion that capitalism is going to collapse. Capitalism has undergone severe crises in its history, and I think it was the Russian revolutionary Lenin who once said, "There is no final crisis of capitalism unless there is an alternative." I think he was right on that, actually. I think that the system is resilient; it has the capacity to pull out of it, it has the capacity to wreak havoc on its people. If the people take it, it will carry on doing it.

That's the answer. There's not going to be any spontaneous collapse of the system. Now we have related to this economic crisis, a political crisis, which I have dubbed the crisis of the extreme center. We have country after country, in Europe and the US, ruled by an extreme center, center left or center right. They do exactly the same things. Bush and Obama. Blair and Cameron. Sarkozy and whoever is going to succeed him. In Germany you often have national coalition governments.

This is now creating a situation where young people are getting more and more alienated from this extreme center. Extreme because it has pushed through extremist economic policies, linked to wars abroad, that many people dislike but which they can't change regardless of who they elect to power. That's a dangerous situation politically.

Let me tell you something. The program of the extreme right in France, Marine Le Pen, the program of the Dutch neofascists, even the Italians, they are horrible on immigration and Muslims and all that, but if you look at their economic program, Marine Le Pen, the leader of the French ultranationalists, is cleaning up her act. She's not saying the things her father was saying. Basically, when she is asked, "What do you believe in?" she says, "The French republic, but a French republic in which the state controls the heights of the economy."

So when she's asked, she says health, education, water, gas, railways, all these should be controlled and owned by the state, because these serve the needs of everyone. The combination of chauvinism and xenophobia and a radical economic program is a dangerous one.

The question we have to ask is, why is not a single center-left, social democratic party using these demands, which are, after all, historically their demands? They're not doing it. The right has realized much more than the left what needs to be done in that part of the world. So it's a problem. The booms and busts will carry on. I don't think that this financial economy based on zombie capital can last forever, but they will make changes as time passes, depending on what happens in the country itself.

The capitalist system can vary from being a social-democratic system to being what we've got now. Social democracy they found necessary to compete with the Soviet Union and say, "This is a democratic version of what they're doing." But now they don't need to do that, because the Soviet Union doesn't exist, so they've come out tooth and claw. We'll do it because we can. We'll exploit you till you drop dead because we can. We'll make wars because we can. That's the system we live under. And I think young people should really study and appreciate it.

**DB:**The infamous boast of Maggie Thatcherâ€™sâ€œTINA, there is no alternative.â€ What do you see evolving in terms of some kind of coherent response to the existing system?

**TA:**There is always an alternative. And the fact is that it can come into being if people struggle for it and fight for it. What we don't have today is any political party fighting for an alternative. That's why I say we're in the grip of the extreme center.

But movements arise, and movements develop. They have done in South America, they could do in parts of Europe. They might even in the United States one day, if not immediately, or in the Arab world. So I see what is going on now in different ways as the harbinger of what is yet to come. When it comes, it will surprise people, too. But you have to struggle and fight for it.

Don't forget that this whole neoliberal program, which has been set in place and taken over the world, was started in, I think, the 1940s and 1950s by Hayek and others in a tiny group of thinkers called the Mont Pelerin Society, in which they used to meet and discuss these ideas. Everyone used to laugh at them and say, "These are crazy people," including all the Keynesians who were running the world with the help of social-democratic-style governments. "These guys are mad." Mad or not, they took the world.

So we have to start thinking very seriously about alternatives. In my opinion, the central pillar of an alternative has to be the intervention of the state to own and acquire property, without which a social welfare state is no longer possible. It's not just funding it through taxes. That period has long gone. The state actually has to be a player in the economic system in order to fund a proper health, education, public transport system. If it doesn't do that, things will go from bad to worse.

So this struggle to reinstate the state in the thinking of people is very vital. This is why neoliberals and some anarchists fall into the same trap, that the state can't be used, we've got to devise policy also without the state. The neoliberals are being dishonest, because without the state they couldn't have achieved what they have done, with the state backing them, and pushing through deregulation laws.

**DB: And bailouts and subsidies.**

**TA:** And all that. The state, which was considered so evilâ€™the bankers, and the financial speculators finally went on their knees before it, and said, "Dear state, please help us. We're in trouble." A number of people have said that the state is being used to create socialism for the rich. But the real needs of ordinary people are what are far more important. Things like this have to be done.

In Britain, one is discussing the idea of creating committees, groups in every single city with a charter of ten crucial demands to mobilize people who are not even political, but who will see the strength of these demands, and have a march of a million people or more on Parliament to deliver this remonstrance and say, "This is what we want, which none of the parties inside are delivering." And not just as a part of propaganda, but to create something. This can be done in every country in the world, actually. You don't have to immediately build up new political parties, but you have to create the basis for them.

These occupations, even though some of the young people involved in them run away from the idea, should begin to build something that lasts. After all, however nice it is to live in tents for a few weeks in the park it can't last for too long. The kids will get tired and go back to what they were doing before. Then it will be back to business as usual. We need to create institutions that always challenge business as usual.

**DB: What about the efficacy of elections in terms of effecting change? Did the election of Obama in 2008 finally disabuse people of that possibility?**

**TA:** In countries where that can happen it is very positive, as in South America, where government after government is elected to bring about change. It doesn't change everything, but it begins to implement that. Obama was never interested in change. His slogans were totally vacuous. "Change we can believe in," which in effect has meant no change at all. Or "Yes, we can," which is one of the most vacuous slogans I've heard in an election anywhere. But it's become popular.

The funny thing about American dominance is that you see these pathetic little European politicians, even though they don't speak English, ending with saying, "Yes, we can. Yes, we can." And you say, "What world do you guys live in? Are you totally out of touch with your people?" The question is, "Yes, we can what?" Yes, we can challenge the powers of capital? Yes, we can stop making wars? No. Yes, we can enhance civil rights? No. Yes, we can lock up whistleblowers? Yes. That's the change we believe in. We'll lock up more whistleblowers than Bush. We'll release fewer people from Guantánamo than Bush.

I don't think that the lesson of Obama has gone through totally, by the way. I think lots of people still have illusions, and so they find excuses for him, that he's a prisoner. This is my favorite one, that we have a prisoner of Zenda here, the prisoner of the White House. Whose prisoner? The guy couldn't wait to enter the White House. He had been campaigning for it for so long, making himself moderate, cautious, post-racial. Post-racial in the US? In a country where now the figures of Black people incarcerated in prison or part of the prison system through parole networks, and hence not allowed to vote, the actual number of these people now is exactly the same as the size of the Black slave population before the Civil War.

This is post-racial America? Someone has to say these things. And I think African Americans are realizing that this is the case but don't want to say it in public. Sometimes people don't like it, but I always say this now, to just break illusions. It doesn't matter what the color of the skin of the president of the United States is or whether it's a woman. You have to judge them not on the basis of their gender or their race, but on the basis of what they do. Because they are not ordinary prime ministers or presidents, they are imperial presidents. That's a distinction that is very important.

**DB: You've been a part of many social movements over the decades, both in Pakistan as well as in Britain. You know that they can take an unpredictable turn. There is no saying with certainty that this will be the outcome. So in this moment of enormous economic upheaval, one could venture to say that there is a potential for some kind of revolutionary breakthrough. What that might be, again, is purely speculative.**

**TA:** Look nobody, but nobody, predicted the Arab uprisings. And that shows that history remains very original. You can mimic it, you can echo it, but it's very difficult to repeat it. It finds its own paths and channels. So I would say that, yes, virtually anything is possible. In some countries, in Greece, for instance, it would be a relief to everyone if a revolution took place. Really. They wouldn't care what the structures are. They would just say help us. People would see it as a relief. But whether the people on the left or the masses are prepared to challenge the system frontally is another question. That's a huge risk as well.

And I say this after a great deal of reflection. The Egyptians and the Tunisians and the Yemenis and others who are still fighting won because they were prepared to sacrifice their lives, they were prepared to say, "OK, if necessary, we'll die." When a people loses its fear of death, it can achieve miracles.

The Europeans haven't reached that stage yet. They really haven't. And they've got to achieve a bigger miracle than the one achieved in the Arab world of two despots being toppled and others being under threat. So, yes, it can

happen, but it depends a lot on the political consciousness of a country and its people. Of course, political consciousness, too, is never linear. It can go up and then it can stabilize and be flat for years to come.

And suddenly the situation changes and it can go up very fast. When that happens, you do need some institution, whether it is a popular assembly or a political organization or a party of a new type, to take the decision, with the people and their support, and say, "Now we're going for power." You have to do that. If you say ludicrous things like, "We can change the world without taking power," then you might as well go into the lavatory and flush yourselves down, because you're not going to achieve anything.

**DB: You have a sense that there is a possibility of surprise, that there could be some kind of breakthrough.**

**TA:** I think, given what's happened in the Arab world and given what's happened in history throughout time, it throws up surprises. The historical process is original. Things can happen which can take everyone by surprise. I'm not saying this in a mystical fashion. I'm saying that when people have reached a stage where they find that they cannot live in the same old way anymore and the rulers feel they cannot govern in the same way anymore" they have to curb, restrict, become more and more despotic, like despotic capitalism itself" then anything can happen. I'm not saying that our side will necessarily win, but it will certainly fight.

*This interview was published in [International Socialist Review No 81, January-February 2012](#).*

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[1] Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister from 1947-1964.

[2] Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was Pakistan's ninth prime minister, from 1973 to 1977, and founder of the Pakistan People's Party. He was removed in a successful coup d'état led by General Zia ul- Haq, and executed in 1979 in a trial engineered by General Zia.