

Should we line up behind the Taliban in the name of internationalism?

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Ilham Moussaïd's candidacy on the Vaucluse NPA ticket in France's recent regional elections has sparked a number of debates within the NPA and beyond. [1] On 27 February 2010, Hendrik Davi wrote a piece entitled "Overcoming two debates within the anti-capitalist Left". [2] He takes up a whole range of questions, including internationalism in a section entitled "The new imperialist wars". The contribution that follows focuses exclusively on this section. It is a longer version of a piece I submitted to the NPA's National Political Committee (CPN).

In his contribution of 27 February 2010, Hendrik Davi seeks to provide a single overarching approach to a series of debates prompted by the NPA's position on the elections (his own position has been to support the unity of the left of the Left as well as Ilham Moussaïd's candidacy). Indeed, he aims to "create a new paradigm that will enable us to change society and chart a way out from capitalism." No more, no less. His contribution piles groundless accusations on top of confusion and killer innuendo. But he does sometimes clearly present his ideas, especially on the matter of anti-imperialism. This is the question I wish to address here, even though there are other areas that deserve a response.

For Hendrik, there is on the one hand a Left that has gotten bogged down in "neither nor" positions (such as "neither NATO nor the Taliban") and on the other another Left (his own) that knows to what extent Western imperialism "has to be our main enemy." There is more than one way to understand what the notion of main enemy implies. Unfortunately, the conclusions Davi has reached on this score turn out to be particularly worrying. But he expresses something that is part of the current zeitgeist and which is connected to some important debates. So it would be best not to ignore the points he raises.

To illustrate his argument, Hendrik refers to Hezbollah, Hamas and the Taliban. To illustrate my own, I will only deal with the Taliban, a formation with which I am more familiar.

No political "judgement"? Hendrik says that "The choices of those struggling against this imperialism are their own affair; it serves no purpose to judge them." This is a troubling sentence. It goes without saying that we are not "red professors" handing out simplistic advice. We have to understand what is specific to each struggle and each movement. Hezbollah is not Hamas, which in turn is not the Taliban. But this requires that we study, analyze and characterize – which therefore requires us to put forward criteria for political judgement.

The Taliban are an extremely reactionary, xenophobic, obscurantist fundamentalist current, among the worst sexists, particularly intolerant and virulently anti-communist. They are not anti-capitalist.

Even more extreme than the Wahhabites, they impose a reign of terror on society, going so far as banning music and burning down record stores.

When you are a political activist, you can't blissfully walk away from the need to define the political movements with which you are confronted. Whether they are religious political movements or not does not change this fact. It may be a difficult task and the reality of these movements may be complex and evolving; and the "conceptual" definition of the Taliban may be a subject for debate (how appropriate is the label of "fascism" in the Third World?). But given the type of terror they carry out against society, they play a role that does indeed make them very similar to fascists. At least this side of things is not hard to figure out! Should we neither say this nor be mindful of it?

No "moral denunciation"? For Hendrik, "a moralistic critique of movements of national struggle automatically strengthens Western and American propaganda." What exactly are we talking about in the case of Pakistan and Afghanistan? The radical domination of women, who have been driven out of public space; the destruction of schools for girls, whom it is forbidden to educate; acid thrown in the faces of women students for not being (sufficiently) veiled; summary justice which, in the name of upholding morality, stones women and slits men's throats.

Che Guevara liked to quote a phrase coined by Marti that defined "the true colors of human dignity." "All true men," Marti said, "must feel a sting when another man is slapped in the face." As such, an internationalist is a person that "feels personally insulted whenever someone is the victim of aggression, whenever there is an attack on human dignity and happiness, wherever in the world it may be." [3]

I too thought that a revolutionary should be indignant about all forms of oppression, everywhere in the world. That is apparently not the opinion of Davi; he asserts that any criticism and any indignation would "automatically strengthen Western and American propaganda." So should we remain silent, lie and abandon Taliban victims to their fate? That would be pushing the logic of "the main enemy" very far indeed.

The main enemy. We have to fight against our own imperialism, making no concessions; we have to support resistance struggles, unconditionally. As political activists in France, that is our main responsibility. But should we therefore forget that our "secondary enemy" (the Taliban) attack all non-believers? The Pakistani LPP is growing in the country's northwest, where the Taliban operate. The Taliban have already killed three of our comrades. Should we recommend to the LPP that they stop defending the Pashtun population in order to avoid offending the "anti-imperialist fighters"?

In his book *Fragments mécréants* [4], Daniel Bensaïd quotes a wonderful poem from Eric Fried that is worth several strategy documents: "*Steeped in my struggle/against the main enemy/I was cut down/by my secondary enemy/not treacherously from behind/but openly [...]/ and in keeping/with his declared intentions.*" [5]

In the Vaucluse area of France, far removed from any threat from the Taliban, Davi is free to play around with the notion of the main enemy; it doesn't commit him to much. But there are very few Afghan and Pakistani progressives and revolutionaries who can ignore the daily reality of this threat, even when they are against NATO's occupation and war.

The real world. We shouldn't forget that the rise of fundamentalist movements has pitted Muslims against other Muslims. Sunni fundamentalists are far more hostile to Shiites (and vice versa) than they are to the West. Fundamentalism has plunged Muslim countries into religious wars of the kind Christianity experienced in the past; many of the terrorist attacks in Pakistan provide dramatic illustration of this state of affairs. The majority of victims are Muslims and not soldiers of imperialist

armies.

A growing number of people are sounding the alarm within the Muslim world itself. In December 2005, for example, Abdurrahman Wahid (known as Gus Dur) declared, "It is time for people of good will from every faith and nation to recognize that a terrible danger threatens humanity." [6] What matters here are not the political trajectory and contradictions of Abdurrahman Wahid, but rather what he represented within Asian Islam and its secular traditions until his death in December 2009. [7] He had led the main Muslim organization (with 60 million members) in Indonesia – the most populous Muslim country in the world – and then became the country's first president after the fall of the Suharto dictatorship. He was not some marginal figure.

An aside. Do these warnings from Asia concern France? It does indeed appear that fundamentalist movements are present here. I know nothing about who they are and what their strength is. But we can't pretend that the problem doesn't exist. Saudi and Iranian money works wonders. When you see groups of the faithful praying on the sidewalk during a Palestine demonstration here, this is not an everyday expression of religious faith. In Lahore, for example, one does not see passers-by suddenly drop down on their knees to pray in the dust. This is a political display, and it's important to be aware of this.

I am well aware of the fact that you can't directly equate expressions of "identity" within communities subjected to anti-Muslim stigmatization and anti-Arab racism, of the kind one sees in France, with the dynamic at play within Muslim countries themselves. I don't claim to address this question here – in a piece primarily about the Taliban! But a number of fundamentalist currents are active internationally and some of them have secured a foothold in France. For anyone working in the *quartiers populaires*, it's important to know who is here and where – just as it is important to know where the neo-fascist Front National is active (or where far-Right evangelical Christian movements have made inroads within communities of African origin).

War of civilizations. We should fight against the "war of civilizations" ideology that is so dear to George Bush. Imperialism – and especially American imperialism – bears a major responsibility for the spread of this deadly poison. But the Taliban do not oppose this world view. They deliberately place themselves within its scope and feed off of it. There is a specific dialectic at play here between "main" and "secondary". The Taliban are protagonists on a terrain of confrontation shaped by imperialism. This terrain is foreign to us, but they consider it to be their own. In this regard, Bush's fundamentalist friends and the Taliban are twin stars.

By lining up behind the Taliban, one becomes a prisoner of a dynamic (the "war of civilizations") that we fiercely oppose.

Anti-imperialist? There are words whose meaning gets clouded by the way they are used. Today this is what has happened to "anti-imperialist", a term which should be handled with a little more care.

Imperialism is the unequal organization of the world by capitalism. Unless one believes that "national bourgeoisies" are in a position to fashion a different and more "progressive" global capitalist order, to what extent is it possible to be both "anti-imperialist" and pro-capitalist?

The situation today is very different from what it was in the 1960s and 1970s. The case of the Taliban also illustrates the political problems that face us today. One can provide a detailed analysis of how the Taliban have been able to secure the temporary support of Pakistan's tribal populations: using radio for their sermons, thereby reaching women by getting into the domestic sphere; replacing a defective state by settling daily local disputes that the Pakistani justice system

had allowed to fester for years on end; and so forth. But these are matters of secondary importance.

The Taliban are above all the creation of the Pakistani army's secret services – the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) – who wanted a friendly government in Kabul in order to give them the “strategic depth” in Afghanistan that would enable them to manoeuvre in the event of a conflict with India. As such, the Taliban (and other fundamentalist currents) were allowed to freely set up schools of Koranic indoctrination (madrasas) where poor families sent their children in the absence of better options. With Islamabad's support, they took power in Afghanistan and weren't “anti-imperialist” until the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the US-led NATO intervention that followed.

The 911 attacks created a new situation, forcing the Pakistani army to play a double game in relation to the Taliban. Roughly speaking, the army is opposed to Taliban formations that operate in Pakistan while protecting those which, though based in Pakistan's tribal zones, only run military operations in Afghanistan. This creates tensions with Washington whenever the Americans are in a phase of full-out military offensive against the Taliban; but these tensions die down again when the Americans give a green light to negotiations with “good” Taliban in Afghanistan.

None of this has anything even remotely to do with the necessary fight against imperialism.

Emancipation. Davi wraps up his contribution to the debate with a grab-bag listing of those forces that are supposedly “the new driving forces behind an emancipatory project,” collectively in a position to chart a “way out from capitalism”. “This is the unity that we have to build.” I don't want to get into a detailed examination of the list of forces, but we run the risk of sinking into a ridiculous form of “postmodernism” if we don't tackle the question of how this unity can be built. Strangely, in his concluding paragraph Davi doesn't explicitly mention something that should actually be quite obvious: this unity can only be built through united anti-capitalist struggle.

Political struggle is waged on all terrains – from the realm of culture to different forms of oppression, with each terrain playing a specific role in the building of alternatives. But you can't find a “way out from capitalism” without mobilizing around the “driving contradictions” that play a decisive role in relation to the transformation of societies. Given the focus of this exchange (the Taliban), I have focused on two such contradictions even though I know there are others, such as the relationship between humans and nature (the field of political ecology).

The class contradiction. This remains at the heart of the capitalist mode of production. Yet Islamist movements in general, and fundamentalist currents in particular, promote the unity of their community of believers. They do not want them to become divided along socio-economic lines – and so they line up alongside the propertied classes against any such threat. In contrast, we build the unity of the exploited across communal boundaries.

The gender contradiction. Feminism is not about a “sector” of work among many others. It is a matter of the conditions faced by half of humankind, present across all sectors; it involves a struggle against a form of oppression that is longstanding and universal. Feminism tackles patriarchy in all areas of society, including within the dominant ideologies – such as religion. “Class-struggle feminism” (as we used to call it in France) enables us to link each of the two “contradictions” mentioned here.

Not only do forces such as the Taliban preserve the relations of capitalist (or even feudal) exploitation, they exacerbate forms of oppression (including among and between tribal groups) that are already quite extreme. [8] Not only do they not have the same “social project” as ours, they aggressively oppose struggles in which we are currently involved.

Religion of the poor? “Faith-Based movements”, as they are called these days, do sometimes fight against the established order. But in such cases, they oppose the ruling classes and the hierarchy of their churches. Such things are visible to any observer. The best known organization of this type in Asia (for the older generation) was the Christians for National Liberation (CNL) in the Philippines (the only major country in Asia with a majority converted to Christianity), based on the “theology of struggle” associated with Ed de la Torre. Under the Marcos dictatorship in the 1970s, the CNL went underground and joined the armed struggle; it jointly founded the National Democratic Front (NDF) led by the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP).

In the Muslim world, the Sarekat Rakyat (SR) is probably one of the most important examples of the anti-colonial and anti-capitalist radicalization of an Islamic current. The SR was a left split from the Sarekat Islam (SI), which had been one of the sources of the mass base of the early Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI). But the division between the SR and the SI was prompted in 1923 specifically around the question of class struggle and the autonomy of mass movements in relation to social elites.

It is harder to find movements of this type and of equivalent significance in Pakistan, although Tariq Ali does point to the “calibre” of radical Muslims such as Mehmud Hasan and Ubaidullah Sindhi at the beginning of the 20th century (long before independence and the partition of the British Empire in India). [9] As for Afghanistan, I confess to my ignorance on this subject.

Unfortunately, we are no longer in the 1960s and 1970s. Today, movements of the “liberation theology” sort are very weak. [10] On the other hand, reactionary forces have been strengthened in all the religions we have looked at (Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and so forth). The Taliban are an extreme manifestation of this overall process.

Whom do we support in Afghanistan and Pakistan? Some people have proposed the creation of a global “anti-imperialist front” uniting the far-Left and Islamist Muslims, including fundamentalists. I am against such a proposal, and I hope Davi is too.

We should, however, support organizations such as the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) [11], political figures such as Malalai Joya, organizations such as the Afghan Labour Revolutionary Organization (ALRO) and other political groups from the Maoist tradition in particular, students in struggle, and so forth. In Pakistan, there is the Labour Party Pakistan (LPP) and there are social movements (trade unions, peasant organizations, women’s groups, and others) involved in day-to-day class and women’s struggles.

Is Davi suggesting that we instead support the Taliban, who threaten the lives of our comrades?

Fight on two fronts. Davi’s entire contribution seeks to denigrate “neither nor” politics. Yet we are very often obliged to fight on (at least) two fronts. There is nothing strange or shameful about this. The world cannot be reduced to two camps; we don’t have only one enemy; we don’t face only one solitary danger.

Those we support in Afghanistan and Pakistan fight on two fronts themselves. Against American imperialism and dictatorial regimes. Against NATO and the Taliban. Against the army and fundamentalists. Against the WTO and their own countries’ bourgeois-feudal elites. Against the “war of civilizations” and patriarchy. What has Davi got against these comrades?

Internationalism is not only about fighting our own imperialism. It is also about supporting struggles around the world for democratic and social emancipation. Does Davi really believe the Taliban are an emancipatory movement?

The reason I am hammering away on this question is that we need the utmost clarity around such matters.

Pierre Rousset

P.S.

* Translation from French: Nathan Rao.

Footnotes

[1] France's New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) was founded in February 2009. Ilham Moussaïd is a Muslim woman who wears an Islamic headscarf and is a member of the NPA. For the March 2010 regional elections, she was listed fourth on the NPA party list in the department of Vaucluse in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region. Her main supporters wanted her to lead the NPA ticket and say they would take a similar position in the case of a member wearing the full veil, and not just a headscarf. This candidacy has prompted a number of debates within the NPA on the public face of an anti-capitalist party — and on emancipation, secularism, religion, feminism, anti-racism, immigrants and their children, and the immigrant and working-class quartiers populaires, among other topics. Now that the elections are over, these debates are being organized more formally within the NPA.

[2] Hendrik Davi and I were both members of the former LCR and are now members of the NPA.

[3] See Michael Löwy, "Che's revolutionary humanism - ideals of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara"
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article4282>

[4] Daniel Bensaïd, *Fragments mécréants*, chapter 2. Available in French on the ESSF website:
[Fragments mécréants II : La République imaginaire](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article3174)
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article3174>

[5] Available in French on the ESSF website: Eric Fried, [Poèmes sans frontière : « j'ai été abattu par mon ennemi secondaire »](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article16648)
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article16648>

[6] Abdurrahman Wahid, "Right Islam vs. Wrong Islam - Muslims and non-Muslims must unite to defeat the Wahhabi ideology," 30 December 2005. Available on the ESSF website: [Right Islam vs. Wrong Islam - Muslims and non-Muslims must unite to defeat the Wahhabi ideology](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article16475)
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article16475>

[7] See Max Lane, [art](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article16563), 1 February 2010. Available on the ESSF website: [Abdurrahman Wahid: contradictions of an unsuccessful democrat](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article16563)
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article16563>

[8] See Bushra Khaliq, ["Rising extremism, war on terrorism and women's lives in Pakistan"](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article16479)
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article16479>

[9] Ali, Tariq (1970). *Pakistan: Military Rule or People's Power*. London: J. Cape.

[10] This is why position pieces on “Marxism and religion” that were drafted to open ourselves up to liberation theology currents are now rather outmoded in relation to the movements with which we are now confronted.

[11] See RAWA's presentation of itself on the ESSF website: [Afghanistan: About Rawa...](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article16831)
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article16831>