

Interview

Toward A New Radical Politics

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Interview: A lion of the literary left on the war in Lebanon, U.S. imperialism, and the prospects for reform in the Middle East.

Tariq Ali's books garner wildly emphatic reviews on Amazon.com, alternately adoring and scathing depending on the politics of the reviewer—the kind of polarized reactions you'd expect for the editor of *The New Left Review*.

Born and raised in pre-partition Pakistan, Ali studied at Oxford, where he became a fierce opponent of the Vietnam War; later, he broadened his critique to condemn what he saw as American imperialism in much of the world, especially the Middle East and Latin America. Along the way, he faced Henry Kissinger in debate and became a lifelong friend of Edward Said.

Though a committed leftist, Ali has never been narrowly political in his work. He has published dozens of books in a nearly 40-year career, ranging from historical fiction—early Islam is his most frequent topic—to political essay. His most recent work, *Bush in Babylon*, took aim at the American invasion of Iraq, a war which he might call a new chapter in the intertwined histories of Western imperialism and Muslim extremism chronicled in his previous work, *Clash of Fundamentalisms*.

It was hardly surprising, given this background, that Ali was among several writers—including Noam Chomsky, Jose Saramago and Howard Zinn—who recently signed two letters supporting Palestinians and Lebanese in the face of what they called Israel's campaign of "deliberate and systematic destruction."

"Each provocation and counter-provocation is contested and preached over," they wrote in the first, dated July 19. "But the subsequent arguments, accusations and vows, all serve as a distraction in order to divert world attention from a long-term military, economic and geographic practice whose political aim is nothing less than the liquidation of the Palestinian nation."

As well as an editor of the *NLR* Ali is editorial director of the leftist publishing house Verso, and he's a frequent contributor to *The Guardian*, *Counterpunch*, and *The London Review of Books*. He recently talked with *Mother Jones* about his views on the war in Lebanon, the need for an Islamic Reformation, and the rise of Latin America's new left.

Mother Jones: In the letter that you and several other writers published on July 19, you said the "liquidation of the Palestinian nation" is proceeding more rapidly these days. How long have you felt that the possibility of Palestinian statehood is gone?

Tariq Ali: I have felt that for some years, even before these latest Israeli actions. Once it became clear to the Palestinians that the Oslo accords were a farce and that no Israeli government was prepared to implement even the limited concessions they had promised in them, then it was only a matter of time. My view has always been that either the Palestinians get a fair and just state or you have a single-state solution-there is no third way in between these two. Now, curiously, the Israelis by their own action have made a single state the only possible thing.

MJ: Some of the signatories are, like yourself, both fiction writers and activists. Do you think that writers have an obligation to use their fame as platforms for activism? Even if they are venturing out of their field?

TA: I think it depends on how they feel. You know in many parts of the world, including the Arab world, the Latin American world, and even parts of the Western world, there is a tradition of writers being quite engaged. Particularly in the Arab world you have had very, very strong traditions of literature and poetry and most of the writers have been deeply committed to the cause of the Arab nation. In Latin America likewise: they're public intellectuals. And I think this is a good thing, especially in a world where the mainstream media offers very little diversity of opinion in its pages.

MJ: How do you think the current war in Lebanon, and Hezbollah's apparent military successes, will change the equation in the Middle East?

TA: It has shaken the world, but it's not shaken it enough to understand the root causes of this-[which is why] we have this grotesque situation where the Israelis, the United States and the French collaborate to try to push through a resolution which is so pro-Israel that even the tamest of Arab leaders can't accept it.

But Hezbollah has changed things, there's no doubt about that. Now even Lebanon's Prime Minister, not known for being a particularly strong politician, has told Condoleezza Rice she shouldn't bother visiting the country. Unheard of! And the other aspect of this of course is that there've been demonstrations, small but important demonstrations against the war, in Tel Aviv, in Haifa, in Jerusalem, and I think that these will grow in size as people see that this absurd and criminal war waged by the Israeli regime against Lebanon is making their lives unsafe.

MJ: Do you have the same hope for a movement demanding the end of Israel's occupation of the Palestinian Territories?

TA: Yes, I think you will have within Israel a resistance, including many Jewish people who will see we can't carry on in the same old way. And here I think the South African analogy is not so foolish: that many white South Africans finally realized that we can't carry on in the same old way, we have to do a deal with the people we've been oppressing, and this is best for both communities. Maybe I'm being ultra-optimistic, but I think that before this century comes to an end something like that will emerge.

MJ: How can you support Hezbollah's actions-or those of Hamas-given both groups' adherence to a fundamentalist ideology that you make no secret of disliking?

TA: Well look, I don't agree with their religious views, obviously. I'm not a believer. That's hardly a secret: I state it in public. However when a country is invaded and attacked and people resist it's important to speak up and to say they have the right to resist and to defend their right to resist. The whole history of the 20th century is a history of resistance groups which are either nationalist or, in large parts of the Muslim world, religious groups, including for instance in Libya and the Sudan. There, the groups resisting the Italian invasion were ones that [Europeans] couldn't support

politically-but nonetheless they defended them against attack. When Mussolini invaded Abyssinia and Albania in the name of European civilization and said he was going to wipe out these backward feudal despotisms, most people in the West defended the Ethiopians and the Albanians against the Italian onslaught and said they had the right to resist. So it's on that principle-that when people, whoever they may be, you may not like them, but when they decide to resist, you have to defend their right to do so.

MJ: You've been writing about imperialism for decades. Do you think the current Bush administration is practicing a new form of imperialism?

TA: It's different in the sense that the enemy has changed. It's no longer Communism and it's no longer nationalism but it is other movements who they feel have to be destroyed to bring the world totally under the sway of the hegemon. But here I think as I've been arguing since 9/11 they've made a big miscalculation in attacking Afghanistan and Iraq. And now even US commentators who were really sort of gung-ho for the war, like Tom Friedman, or Democrats, like Edwards, have said that it was a mistake to vote for the war and we need to discuss with the military the best way of withdrawing. The fact that some of these weasel politicians who didn't have the nerve to oppose the war when they should've opposed it, are now jumping ship is an indication of how badly the war is going.

MJ: You've written that the so-called war on terror requires a political not a military solution. Aside from ending the American occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Israeli occupation of Palestine, what would that political solution entail?

TA: Well I think that because they've made war it makes a political solution much more difficult. I think the United States now and its British attack dog are not taken seriously anywhere in the world and can play no role in helping a political solution.

MJ: You've called for an Islamic Reformation. Where do you see the best prospects for such a movement?

TA: I used to hope-and I've still not given up on it-that a big reform movement could arise in Iran, which in some ways is one of the most cultured Islamic countries, with a very long pre-Islamic tradition as well which hasn't been completely wiped out. But when the United States and Israel behave in the way they do, then that sets it back. So I'm quite despondent on that particular front at the moment. That's one problem.

The second problem is that in many parts of the Islamic world, secular forces, where they exist, tend now to be so unsure of themselves, so lacking in self-confidence, that in many cases-not in all-they line themselves up fairly squarely behind the imperial project and that then creates a big vacuum in which the Islamists become the dominant power because they are the only ones then who are seen as resisting. And that I think has been a very, very dangerous development in the Islamic world. And when I go often I meet very, very good people-intellectuals, writers-just sitting completely despondent, trapped between the American hammer and the Islamist anvil, not knowing which way to turn.

MJ: Can you point to any leaders you've encountered in Muslim countries, Arab or otherwise, that might be a beacon of hope for religious reformation?

TA: There's no movement as such, but you know if you look at Iran the bulk of the population-75% of the population-is under 30 years of age, and these are people who've grown up totally under clerical rule, and their first sort of gut instinct is to resent all the social codes which are imposed on them. I

have been arguing that this is where you will probably have an upheaval in about ten years time. Currently that situation is on hold because of all the threats against Iran, which has united the country. Whatever you think about those threats or why they are made, certainly they have the effect of making the majority of people in Iran very angry with the West, and they see the Islamists as the only opposition, and the reason they see them as the only opposition is 'cause there ain't nobody else!

MJ: To judge from your writings you don't appear to place much stock in the potential of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to effect change.

TA: I don't. In the first place, I don't call them NGOs, I call them WGOs-Western Governmental Organizations. Some of them do decent work but by and large what they do is to buy up lots and lots of people in these countries who are not then engaged in any form of political activity or social movements, who basically pay themselves salaries, run small offices, and go on demonstrations chanting, "Another world is possible." And I don't think that's particularly helpful, and I think increasingly now people are beginning to see through the NGO-ization process.

MJ: Like many on the far left, you link anti-imperialism to anti-capitalism. And you seem to discount the possibility of Islamic or other religious fundamentalisms providing a long-term basis for resistance. But capitalism and religious conservatism are quite broadly based and well entrenched. What alternate framework for resistance do you envision?

TA: I have been arguing in recent years that while what is happening in the Middle East is important in the sense that it prevents the imperial power from getting its way in whatever it wants. But in terms of offering a socio-political model for the world, it offers nothing, either to the world or to its own people. So from that point of view, the situation is grim.

Where there is a different model emerging is not in the Islamic World but in Latin America. This is a continent where you have had giant social movements from below pushing a whole range of politicians and political leaders to power through democratic elections and then putting pressure on them to fulfill their promises-and in Venezuela and Bolivia the leaders are beginning to do so. This is now creating a massive pole of attraction all over the world. When Hugo Chavez flies into an Arab country and is interviewed on Arab television, you have a phenomenal response from the Arabs, saying why can't we have an Arab Chavez? And the reason is that he explains what he is doing in Venezuela, that they are using the oil money to build schools, to build hospitals, to build universities, to help the poor, who have never been helped, and from my point of view, this particular model, which I would describe as a left-social democratic model, is very important because it's the only thing that challenges the neo-liberal strangle hold on the global economy.

MJ: You were in Bolivia decades ago during Che Guevara's campaign there. Have you been since the election of Evo Morales in January?

TA: I've not been but I will go soon. It's very, very heartening what's happening there. Someone asked me the other day what I think of Bolivia and I described it as "Che's revenge." You have a government in power which has publicly paid homage to Che and his struggle and I said, he would've been so pleased by that if he'd been alive! It's the only developments taking place in the world which one can identify with to a large extent and say, Great!

MJ: Do you see Morales potentially abandoning his promises to aid the poor now that he's in office, as you have accused Lula of doing in Brazil?

TA: Not so far. You can't exclude any possibility, but so far no. The first thing Morales did when he

was elected was very interesting: a plane was sent for him, he got into it and flew to Havana and got a two-and-a-half-hour tutorial from the old man about what to do, how to proceed. And that's a very public gesture. Most Europeans when they're elected go to Washington and kiss ass in the White House.

MJ: You visited Cuba last year and met with writers and intellectuals there. How would you characterize their situation? You've always lauded the Cuban Revolution but certainly it has meant a lot of restrictions for Cubans.

TA: I haven't defended those restrictions. I think the big tragedy of the Cuban Revolution was that it became dependent on the Soviet Union, and it became dependent on the Soviet Union under a very reactionary bureaucratic regime led by Leonid Brezhnev. I think that adversely affected Cuban culture and Cuban politics, [and it] made the Cuban press the most dull and dreary and predictable in the whole of Latin America. Writers were persecuted. I never defended any of that.

But at the same time I refused to back those who wanted to get rid of Fidel, who sent assassins to kill him, who want Miami to move to Havana, I'm not in favor of that. I think that the Cuban Revolution has made incredibly important gains-and you can see these when you go, despite the hardships. It's the most educated country in the continent, probably in the whole of the third world. In a population of 12 million you have between 800,000 and a million graduates produced each year. You have human capital in the shape of doctors who are helping Africa, Latin America. I remember very vividly that when the earthquake happened in Pakistan, the Cubans sent 1,100 doctors, half of them women, which were more than the doctors sent by all the Western countries put together.

But I do think the Cubans have to change some of the political structures there and allow critical voices, for their own sakes, because unless there is accountability the revolution will totally atrophy. I said this very, very publicly to people of all sorts when I was in Havana and they took it on board I think. They have a very cultivated minister of culture, Abel Prieto, who certainly understands the problem. He is re-printing all the Cuban authors who were banned during the bad times: Cabrera Infante, Reinaldo Areinas, all these people are being re-printed now in Cuba. And these absurd, absurd and crazy restrictions on homosexuality have all gone: there is none of that left, which is a big leap forward.

MJ: So many movements you were once part of-from Marxists to the non-aligned camp to anti-Vietnam war activists-peter out. What has kept you on the same track, ideologically?

TA: I guess one of the thing that has kept me on the track is that I've worked very closely with a group of people, we have a magazine called The New Left Review, a publishing house called Verso. And we have maintained a collective intellectual identity, even in bad times. It's not the case that The New Left Review has been unaffected by the cataclysmic changes of the late 80s; many [of our former contributors] today are basically liberal war mongers or "laptop bombardiers." So it's not that we've been unaffected, it's that the circle that actually produced the magazine and kept it going has kept going and this sort of solidarity within a small group of intellectuals has been important.

In my own case, in the 1980s I stopped being active politically in a direct sense and did lot of film work, documentaries, cinema, theatre, wrote plays, wrote scripts, produced a great deal of stuff, and wrote a lot of fiction-and that move sideways I feel was quite beneficial, in the sense that I cut myself off from dominant political trends of the time which were triumphalist and celebratory and everything was over and nothing was to be done. I just kept aloof from all that. And so when I got re-engaged after 9/11, I came to it fresh, I hadn't been touched by some of these anti-Communist and anti-political and pro-capitalist currents that were sweeping the world.

MJ: So you'd say you are applying the same principles to conflicts today that you were decades ago?

TA: No, not exactly, because the world is very different now. The world which existed when I was young was a world in which all the European empires had collapsed; the United States had suffered a horrendous defeat in Vietnam; many, many countries of the world were asserting their rights and their sovereignties and resisting the big powers and so it was a very different world. There was a lot of space in that world for radical politics to function in. That world has gone, completely, destroyed, wrecked, gone. And so a new form of politics has to be built and how you fight, politically, becomes extremely important. And that is why, as I was saying earlier, what is happening in Latin America I think offers great hope for the 21st century.

P.S.

* Interview Paige Austin published in "Mother Jones", August 9, 2006.
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