

Middle East: The Imperial Fiasco

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I - The Imperial Fiasco

1. The bipartisan consensus with which the US ruling class had approved of the military campaign of the Bush administration after September 11, 2001, including the invasion of Iraq, has crumbled in the face of the setbacks suffered during the occupation of that country. The debates which are taking place in the US establishment are not, however, about what continues to have unanimous support within it: the major strategic importance of controlling the Gulf region and Iraq. What is involved are rather debates about the best way to limit the damage of the Iraq operation, while ensuring the long-term hold of Washington over this part of the world. Also included are debates on how to confront Iran. The regime of the Iranian mullahs is seen by the Bush administration as an Islamic equivalent of Hugo Chavez's Venezuela: a regime that relies on the margin of autonomy with which its oil resources provide it to reject the domination of Washington and to oppose its regional hegemony. Members of the US establishment prefer to stress the possibility of coming to a modus vivendi with Tehran, pointing out the opening of the Iranian regime to neo-liberalism, which strongly distinguishes it from the social radicalisation that is under way in Latin America.

2. The balance sheet of the imperialist expeditions conducted by the Bush administration since the attacks on United States soil is absolutely disastrous. Even in Afghanistan, it is today the Taliban who are on the offensive: a considerable part of the country is once again under their control, and the presence of US and allied troops has become the main cause of the new expansion of this movement from which Washington had claimed to have "liberated" the country. The life of the Afghan population under the rule of the Islamic fundamentalist warlords of the Northern Alliance and under the domination of the Western occupation forces, far removed from the lying claims of the democratization and modernization of Afghanistan and of the liberation of Afghan women, has pulled off the exploit of making entire regions of the country regret the Taliban.

II - Iraq

1. It is, however, Iraq that was the main objective of the imperial offensive, and it is the Iraqi fiasco

that represents the most serious failure of the Bush administration. Its initial - neo-conservative - plan aimed at the establishment in Iraq of a regime with a "democratic" façade, with a majority social base and dominated by the allies of Washington. It was quickly understood that the base for that did not exist and that the dominant forces among the Iraqi Shiites - the community that was supposed to be grateful to the United States - were the pro-Iranian forces. The failure of this plan led the administration, in the absence of reliable partners for a real scenario of "Iraqisation" of the conflict, to play on the religious and ethnic divisions in order to maintain its hegemony. This practice ended up by encouraging a dynamic of religion-based civil war, which took a tragic turn after February 2006 (the anti-Shiite bombing in Samara) - a tragedy of which women were some of the main victims. In return, this dynamic made the failure of the Bush administration all the more obvious.

2. The Bush administration has decided to stake everything on a military escalation aimed at taking military control of the capital, Baghdad, while trying to isolate its main enemy: the movement led by Moqtada al-Sadr. In order to succeed this tactic requires Washington to be able to break the alliance of the Shiite forces. At the same time the Bush administration is considerably increasing its pressure on Tehran, multiplying military gesticulations which give the impression that it is preparing an attack against Iran. All of this is vertebrated by a regional policy whose aim is to counter the influence of Iran by stirring up religious tensions between Shiites and Sunnis on the level of the whole of the Middle East. In this criminal enterprise Washington is acting in collusion with its Sunni Arab allies: the oil monarchies of the Gulf, led by the Saudi kingdom, which is ultra-fundamentalist and dependent on Washington, as well as Egypt and Jordan. The question of Iran's nuclear power is being exploited by Washington in order to scare its regional and international partners. The imperialist motivation for this attitude is all the more clear in that Israel, the privileged ally of the United States, has been, for a long time already, a nuclear power and on top of that a state which, unlike Iran, has not signed the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty.

3. The policy of the Bush administration amounts to a dangerous forward flight, which is not surprising on the part of a government which has already demonstrated an adventurism that is today denounced by a growing majority of the United States ruling class. The other major option in the ranks of the establishment (Baker-Hamilton) calls for looking for a way out of the impasse for the United States by means that are above all political, in particular by negotiating compromises with Iran and Syria. The objective is in this way to limit the damage and to try to consolidate a hegemony less absolute and less authoritarian than that envisaged by the Bush administration. The latter rejects such an option as representing a major defeat for the project of unipolar world hegemony of the United States, which it has been pursuing since it came to power.

4. The events of recent months have confirmed a characteristic of the Iraqi "resistance" that has been apparent since the beginning: it is not only a national resistance to the imperialist occupier, but also a force for religious civil war. The armed organizations created in the Sunni Arab regions of Iraq have been conducting from the beginning both a legitimate struggle against the occupation and a reactionary struggle against the rule of the Shiite majority. For the last year the principal movement acting against the occupation among the Shiite Arabs has in its turn engaged in a bloody practice of religious reprisals. The project of Moqtada al-Sadr, of unifying the Iraqi Arabs in a common nationalist opposition to the occupier, seems definitely compromised. The only force conducting a struggle that is still today capable of finding support in all the Iraqi communities is a class force: the union of oil workers. This struggle is all the more important in that it centres on the main reason for the invasion of Iraq. It must be supported by anti-imperialists and by the workers' movement in every country.

III - Lebanon

1. The Israeli offensive against the Lebanese Hezbollah in July and August 2006 fits into the desire of the United States to break Iranian influence in the Middle East. As soon as the Bush administration had carried out its invasion of Iraq, it concerned itself as a priority with confronting Iran and it chose as the principal terrain for this confrontation Lebanon, which presented two targets that were allied to Tehran: the Syrian presence and the Hezbollah. On this question, unlike the question of Iraq, Washington could count on the active collaboration of Paris. However, the inability of Washington's Lebanese allies to defeat the Hezbollah convinced the United States to turn to Israel for this task.

2. The Israeli offensive suffered a resounding failure: not only did the Hezbollah largely demonstrate its capacity for dissuasion in the face of Israel, but it even succeeded in carrying the battle inside the Israeli state itself, for the first time in the history of Israeli-Arab wars. Washington and Paris were forced to have recourse to a "B plan": the deployment of NATO forces (Germany, Spain, France, Italy, and Turkey in particular) in southern Lebanon, under the cover of the United Nations, while waiting for a suitable occasion for these forces to help the Lebanese government, which is dominated by the allies of Washington and Paris, in a new attempt to defeat and disarm the Hezbollah.

3. Since then, political tensions have increased considerably in Lebanon between the allies of Washington and Paris and the allies of Damascus and Tehran. The forces making up the opposition bloc, on the side of the Hezbollah, are not qualitatively different from those which make up the majority. They are conducting a battle for a re-distribution of power between the opposition and the majority in such a way as to "associate" the opposition with governmental decisions. The way in which the opposition avoided organizing a real mobilization, against the neo-liberal program that was adopted in the perspective of the so-called "Paris 3" conference on Lebanon and its debt, clearly demonstrates its socio-political nature. The battle that is underway therefore aims as a priority to negotiate a compromise within the ruling class, even though the opposition puts forward at the same time the democratic demand for a new electoral law and for early parliamentary election. Nevertheless the Bush administration is inciting its Lebanese allies to adopt an intransigent attitude: its closest allies even have a provocative attitude which reveals Washington's desire to push the Lebanese people into a civil war.

4. In spite of the fact that it is a fundamentalist Islamic organization, the Hezbollah cannot be put on the same level as the terrorist currents of Islamic fundamentalism: the way in which the Bush administration and Israel are trying to associate it with Al-Qaeda must be firmly denounced. The Hezbollah is a mass party that has become the principal armed wing of the Shiite community, which makes up the majority in the poor layers of the Lebanese population, in its resistance to Israel's repeated attacks. In this sense, the armed resistance conducted by the Hezbollah is a legitimate struggle, and this organization cannot be put on the same level as the factions of the "Iraqi resistance". So it is legitimate for the Lebanese left to ally with the Hezbollah in resisting Israel and the imperialist forces. The international anti-imperialist Left has a duty to give political support to the Lebanese resistance, independently of the social and political nature of its leadership, and although it is led by the Hezbollah - while criticizing this organization for its fundamental and communalist nature and for its attitude on social and political questions. However, it is to the Lebanese left - and in particular to its principal organization, the Lebanese Communist Party, itself engaged in the resistance - that the international anti-imperialist forces and the workers' movement must give their support in priority.

IV - Palestine

1. The Israeli offensive that has been conducted against Gaza since June 2006 also fits into the same regional strategic framework as the one that determined events in Lebanon: the action of the Bush administration against Iran and its allies. The victory of Hamas in the legislative election of January 2006 was seen as a serious setback by Washington, which immediately put strong pressure on its European allies to treat with ostracism the new democratically elected Palestinian government. At the same time Washington put strong pressure on its Palestinian partner, Mahmoud Abbas, and the right wing sectors who are dominant in the apparatus of Fatah, to reject any perspective of compromise and of a government of national union with Hamas. It was to prevent such a development that the Israeli offensive was launched.

2. The alliance with Hamas, a Sunni Islamic fundamentalist organization, is a precious gain for Tehran: it enables Shiite Iran to give a demonstration of its pan-Islamism and to counter the attempts to isolate it, as a Shiite power, from the Sunnis who make the big majority in the Arab world and within Islam. It is for this reason that it is a priority target of Washington and Israel in the same way as the Hezbollah is, and also because of the radically anti-Israeli attitude that it shares with its Lebanese ally. As in Lebanon, Israel has shown itself incapable of defeating Hamas in its principal bastion, Gaza, without re-occupying the sector, which would have a prohibitive military and political cost. So the principal tactic consists of combining the blows struck from the outside by the Israel with inciting the Palestinian to civil war, in particular by arming the forces allied to Washington within Fatah and by pushing them towards intransigence and provocation. The setbacks of the Bush administration have encouraged Washington's Arab allies to be more in favour of a compromise between the Palestinian factions, so that Tehran can no longer draw political profit from its support for Hamas.

3. Like the Hezbollah, Hamas is a movement with a mass base, which has become the expression of the desire for resistance of an important part of the Palestinian population. Its reputation for dedication and honesty contrasts with the Mafia-style reputation and reality of the apparatus of the Palestinian authority that is dominated by Fatah. However, its programmatic nature is expressed in a profound inability to formulate a policy that could help to break the Zionist consensus: even further, Hamas has for a long time contributed to producing and consolidating this consensus by having recourse to suicide attacks that threatened Israeli civilians without any distinction. In one sense, Hamas is "the preferred enemy" of the Zionist right, which has contributed in no small way to strengthening it by its military provocations and by humiliating its opponents at the head of the Palestinian authority.

4. Anti-imperialists and the workers' movement must support the rights of the Palestinian people to freely choose its government, and fight energetically against the strangling of the Hamas government by Israel, the United States, and their European allies. They must act in solidarity with the legitimate resistance of the Palestinian people to Israeli attacks, independently of the nature of the forces which are conducting this resistance. However, they must establish particular links of solidarity with the organizations of the Palestinian left who are conducting an independent political battle against the Palestinian right which is allied to Washington, and an ideological battle against Islamic fundamentalism within the Palestinian population.

V -Tasks

The military and political setbacks suffered by the imperialist offensive in the Middle East are quite clearly creating a framework that is particularly favourable for energetically re-launching the anti-

war movement. Today the United States and its allies are engaged, with combinations that vary, in three regional wars - Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine - to which must be added a war that is for the moment latent in Lebanon. At the same time the Bush administration has very ostentatiously engaged in preparations for war against Iran and does not hesitate to broaden the regional scope of its military action, as was recently demonstrated by its intervention in Somalia. The Bush administration has its back to the wall, but like a ferocious animal with its back to the wall, it is all the more dangerous. It is urgent to re-double efforts to build a powerful anti-war movement for an immediate and unconditional end to imperialist expeditions, around the following priority axes:

- against any attack on Iran
- for the withdrawal of occupying troops from Iraq
- for the withdrawal of the troops who are intervening in Afghanistan
- for the withdrawal of NATO forces from Lebanon
- for an end to interference in Palestinian internal affairs and for the lifting of sanctions on the Palestinians.

In this battle, the Fourth International will establish particular links of solidarity with the trade union and political forces that are conducting a progressive struggle in the region. It will seek to favour the re-emergence of a Left in the Middle East that is at once democratic, feminist and anti-imperialist.