

Iraq: The Case for Immediate Withdrawal

Tuesday 13 June 2006, by [ACHCAR Gilbert](#), [WEINBERG Bill](#) (Date first published: 4 November 2005).

Gilbert Achcar spoke in New York City on November 3 at an event organized by the Campaign for Peace and Democracy entitled "The Case For Immediate Withdrawal: Wrestling with the Hard Questions". This interview was done the following day by Bill Weinberg of WW4 Report.

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BW: In your comments last night, you started out by noting the irony that many critics of the war had anticipated precisely what is happening now, which is chaos and danger of civil war. And yet, the White House is using precisely this as a rationale for remaining in Iraq.

GA: Yes, this is really an irony of the history of this war. We - I mean, the opponents of the war-had warned that the invasion would produce a very dangerous situation in Iraq, a chaotic situation, and we kept stressing that, and we were faced by the supporters of the war explaining that it will be a cakewalk and that U.S. troops would be welcomed there with flowers and sweets.

And what happened on the ground was very sadly what we predicted-I mean very sadly for the Iraqi people, because it's absolutely tragic what the Iraqi people are suffering right now. And now that we ask for this occupation to stop, and to stop immediately, in light of the disaster has brought to that country, we are faced by the same people who were supporting the war, saying no, the troops must stay because otherwise, there will be chaos.

I don't think we should counter such an argument with a complete reversal of positions, saying exactly what those supporters of the war used to say. We can not now for instance, explain that if the occupation ends, Iraq will suddenly turn into a kind of paradise.

I think no one is in a position to make any prediction as to what might happen after the withdrawal of occupation troops from Iraq. But there is one fact which is absolutely certain, in my view indisputable: the situation has only been deteriorating in a very, very dangerous and tragic manner, ever since the occupation began.

In light of this fact, logic compels us to call for immediate withdrawal of occupation troops from Iraq-with the hope, in any case, that if the Iraqis are faced with this prospect, they might find in that a powerful incentive to come to terms, to agree on some means of renewed co-existence, and for the

reconstruction of their state. And there are grounds to believe that this is one of the possibilities.

If we consider the fact that the main constituency for what is called the insurgency in Iraq is the Arab Sunni areas of the country, and since we know quite well that Arab Sunnis in Iraq are a minority of the population and the Arab Shi'ites are three times their number, and the Kurds are more or less equivalent to the Arab Sunnis in number, but much more powerful in organized military force, I think that, except for a tiny minority of lunatics, the wide majority of the Arab Sunnis will understand that it will be in their interest to negotiate and reach a deal on some compromise.

Otherwise, the option of civil war would be disastrous for the Arab Sunnis because they would be caught between the might and military force of the Kurds on the one hand and the overwhelming majority of Shi'ites on the other side, and that would be a very, very precarious and dangerous situation.

BW: And yet that does not seem to be having a restraining effect on them now.

GA: Precisely. It has no restraining effect on them now. The very presence of the occupation troops prevents this-any direct clash between the three major components of the Iraqi population. And on the other hand, the very presence of the occupation troops gives a real legitimacy to at least the anti-occupation actions waged by the various armed groups in Iraq. And of course the Arab Sunni population considers that this armed struggle is legitimate-though there is a distinction to be made here between actions against occupation troops and actions of a sectarian character.

The mass killings of Shi'ites, the murder of civilians, are not at all welcomed even by the Arab Sunni population in its large majority. I mean, most people consider that to be criminal acts and even the Association of Muslim Scholars always draws a distinction between what they call "honorable resistance," which is just striking at occupation troops, and what they themselves call "terrorism," which is all these actions aimed at civilians or fellow Iraqis...

BW: The Association of Muslim Scholars-this is an Iraqi body?

GA: The Association of Muslim Scholars is the most influential group among the Arab Sunnis in Iraq. The fact that you didn't have a powerful organized opposition to Saddam rooted among Arab Sunnis resulted in the fact that there is no major leadership for the Sunnis as you have for the Shi'ites and the Kurds. But nevertheless, you have a certain number of groups, and it is generally considered that the Association of Muslim Scholars is the most influential among these groups.

And even the Association of Muslim Scholars says that once a withdrawal deadline is fixed, all armed activities should stop. So, there is real grounds to believe that if occupation forces leave Iraq, the incentive for some formula of coexistence between the various components for the population of Iraq will be quite strong.

BW: And yet it seems that it's largely the same groups which are carrying out the resistance activities against the U.S. troops and the attacks on civilians...

GA: Well, no, not all of them. No. The groups waging armed operations in Iraq are many and diverse. At the beginning of the occupation, it was estimated that a high proportion of the attacks on occupation troops were done by local groups of people. You know, Iraq is a country where the population is generally armed, you have tribal traditions and all that...

BW: And that was permitted under Saddam?

GA: Even under Saddam, yes. I mean, no one would dare use their weapon against the regime,

because the regime was so brutal and such a superior organized force, that would have been suicide. But the regime didn't try to disarm the populace of those light, personal weapons that people have had traditionally in this part of the world.

BW: Are we talking about hunting rifles here or machine guns?

GA: Even machine guns. You know, in the Middle East, it's not uncommon to find Kalashnikovs in peoples' homes. It's linked to an ancestral tradition of bearing arms and it's difficult for any government to try to suppress that completely. And with the disintegration of the regime when the invasion started, people got hold of all kinds of weapons. So that's why it's estimated that at the beginning, a lot of the actions are done by local people, even individuals sometimes, or small cells-groups of people revolted because of their direct experience of the occupation.

On the other hand, you already one organized network active, which was left by the previous regime. We know that this time Saddam Hussein's regime, in light of their experience in '91, understood that they wouldn't be able to resist the military power of the United States, and therefore they prepared a network to carry on actions against the occupation troops after the invasion.

They put aside a lot of weapons, explosives, money. So you had a combination of actions coming from an organized network, and local groups or more or less spontaneous actions. And, with time, you had the formation of several organized networks.

So now there are a certain number of groups which are considered to be the major organized networks of the armed struggle in Iraq. You still have the Ba'athists-but the Ba'athists never sign their armed actions under their label, so you never hear of a communique from the Ba'athists saying "our people did this, or attacked this." There are no military communiqués, just political communiqués from the Ba'athists-and it's believed they act behind facades, with Islamic names....

BW: Why? I've always suspected that the role of the Ba'athists is somewhat overestimated in the resistance.

GA: Why would they do so? Because they know that it wouldn't be very popular to use their own identity as a label for armed actions against the occupation. That's a general guess why they would do so. [Chuckles]

BW: Yet you're convinced there is a large Ba'athist element to the resistance.

GA: I think this is indisputable. Absolutely indisputable. What is unclear is what percentage of that is people who are loyal to Saddam Hussein, and what proportion is made of more or less break-away factions, as is sometimes maintained... But the Ba'ath's organized network is definitely playing an important role. And then you have also the al-Qaeda, or the Zarqawi group, which has been dubbed "al-Qaeda in Iraq" by bin Laden...

BW: They seem to have embraced the name themselves...

GA: Yes, but I don't see why it would be astonishing that al-Qaeda recognizes Zarqawi as one of their own. After all, they share the same ideology, obviously. Even though Zarqawi is even more fanatical, if one could be, than even bin Laden, than classical Bin Ladenists are.

And then you have four or five other major groups, with Islamic names...

BW: What are those groups, and what information do we have about them?

GA: Well, in general, you have either three political components of the armed groups. You have Islamic fundamentalists, ranging from the extreme, like Zargawi, to the relatively more moderate. You have the nationalist but non-Ba'athist element, with no allegiance to the Ba'ath party as such, and its ideology and leadership; and you have the Ba'athist.

And that's basically what you've got. Unfortunately, you have no progressive force whatsoever among those groups, and that's a result of the historical defeat of all progressive and left-wing currents in the Middle East, which has led to a vacuum filled by the fundamentalist forces. And that's part of the tragedy of that part of the world.

Now, to get back to your starting point. Yes, it's difficult to make a distinction between groups waging only anti-occupation actions and groups which waging only anti-Shiite actions.

The same groups who are attacking Shiites would also, to claim some legitimacy, at least proclaim some actions against the occupation. You have a combination of two different kind of wars: one which we might call a liberation war against the occupier, and another which is a civil war-actually, a low-intensity civil war, but nevertheless, a civil war.

One can consider that the actions against an occupation are legitimate actions, a part of the right of every people to resist occupation and to fight for liberation. But of course, actions against another component of the same population are criminal actions.

But some of the groups waging the armed struggle have a discourse which equates the U.S. occupation and what they call "Iranian occupation," and they look at the Shi'ites as agents of Iran, and they see themselves as continuing the war waged by Saddam Hussein against Iran. But this war is completely reactionary. I mean, it has absolutely no liberation dimension to it, contrary to what one might say about the other kind of war against the occupation...

There's no important group as such which could be described non-Islamic, non-fundamentalist, non-Ba'athist, nationalist. What I would call the nationalist component of the resistance to the occupation, would be these local, spontaneous actions by people completely fed up with the occupation and the way the U.S. troops behave with the people, and the way they search houses and all that. So this leads to people taking arms and attacking U.S. troops without adhering to any ideology like Islamic fundamentalism or Ba'athism. So these would be, you know, nationalist patriots or whatever the label you want to use...

BW: But without any real organizational capacity...

GA: There's no major network representing that element-unfortunately, I would say, because that would be something better than the two other components: Ba'athists on the one hand, the Islamic fundamentalists on the other. The tragedy is that the organized networks, with the real means, are of the two other kinds.

BW: The major grouping that you hear about is always the so-called "al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia." But what about the other groupings. They all have names like the Army of Mohammed and so on... Do we know anything about them, apart from their names?

GA: It's difficult. But you can find, for instance, Shi'ite allegations that this or that organization is actually Ba'athist. But an important indication was the constitutional referendum of October 15. There was a major shift in the attitude of the Arab Sunnis in the referendum, compared with the January '05 election, which was almost totally boycotted by the Arab Sunnis. This time, you had a real significant participation of Arab Sunni areas-I mean, of course, with a no vote, but it was still

participation in the electoral process. And on the day of the referendum, there were very few violent actions.

The Iraqi government and Washington claimed that it was because of their successful measures, but this is bullshit, the reality is that some of the main armed networks proclaimed a cease-fire for that day because they called for participation in the election. That was something new. If you take the labels most used, four out of the five major groupings called for participation with no vote in the referendum.

And I think this led all other groups-including Zarqawi, who is vehemently opposed to any participation in any kind of election, whether under occupation or not, as a more general position against the very principle of such elections, out of some very fanatical kind of you know-even this group did not to act during that day, for fear of clashing with the other groups. Even the Ba'athists and Zarqawi, who called for a boycott of the elections, did not act that day...

BW: The Ba'ath party-publicly, as identified as such-called for a boycott in some kind of political communique?

GA: Sure, sure. They have their statements on their website...

BW: And do they still claim loyalty to Saddam?

GA: Oh sure. When you go to their website, Saddam Hussein is there... [chuckling]

BW: And their website is maintained from where?

GA: I cannot tell you. But there's more than one website linked to the Ba'athists. You even have an official website of the Ba'ath party where you find all their communiqués. And yes, you have a communique several weeks before the referendum very vigorously condemning that and condemning any participation.

And they publish communiqués attacking other Arab Sunni groups who are getting into the political process which they denounce as traitors. Because for the Ba'athists, the very idea of these elections is something going against their own ambition of recovering power. Although I think it's a very wild dream, actually.

BW: Restoration of Saddam?

GA: Well restoration of Saddam if he's still alive, or restoration of Ba'ath power. But I say, it's a wild dream, because the force has been basically broken. They have the power of an underground network, but if they had to have an open confrontation in some kind of full-fledged civil war, they would be no match in terms of numbers or military capabilities compared with the Kurds and the Shi'ites, who would be of course backed by Iran.

And then you have a fifth group which took no position, which is called Ansar Sunna-the Partisans of the Sunni. This group has claimed several anti-Shi'ite operations. So this is a kind of hardline, fundamentalist type of group-or perhaps some kind of a facade of Ba'aths, it's difficult to tell... But you see there are differences among the armed groups, and that's why I say if the occupation ends in Iraq, one can very reasonably hope for the situation to...

BW: ...stabilize somewhat.

GA: Well, stabilize would be quite optimistic. But at least move toward a political solution, and a

gradual isolation of those elements who would like to continue fighting the Shi'ites.

THE CIVIL WAR SCENARIO

BW: But I think a lot of people fear precisely the opposite. That a U.S. withdrawal would only precipitate a full-fledged civil war, and that the country would basically be divided into three statelets: some sort of Shi'ite Iranian protectorate in the South, and the Kurdish state in the north, and a Sunni Taliban-type regime in the center which would be extremely oppressive. And this would also likely spark foreign intervention-Turkey would intervene if the Kurds get an effective independent state...

GA: Well, as I just said, I think that the very presence of the occupation fuels that kind of scenario, and not the reverse. If the presence of the occupation prevents full-fledged civil war, it facilitates the action of armed groups among the Arab Sunnis because they can fight the occupation, and they can strike at the Shi'ites without facing the Shi'ites directly.

They are just, you know stealthy attacks-suicide bombers and things like that. But the story would be completely different if you didn't have occupation troops. Then also the risk of a massive retaliation by the Shia would be great. And if the situation were to move toward the civil war-the Arab Sunnis would be completely crazy to believe they would be able to be victorious in a confrontation with the Shi'ites and the Kurds.

So when we speak of the break-up of the country-well, the presence of the occupation is not preventing that at all. On the contrary, actually. It is the divide-and-rule policies applied by Washington's representatives in Iraq, since the very start of the occupation, which have fostered to a great extent the tensions among the various components of the Iraqi population. And all the efforts by Khalilzad, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, could not convince the Shi'ites to withdraw their demand for inclusion in the draft constitution of a provision allowing for any provinces of Iraq wishing to do so by majority vote to unite as an autonomous region...

BW: The U.S. was opposed to this measure?

GA: Well, the U.S. could not come openly against that. But it's clear from all the attempts by Khalilzad to negotiate a compromise between Arab Sunnis and Shias and Kurds that Washington was not very happy about this prospect. And why so? Because for Washington, any kind of autonomous Shi'ite region in the South, where you have especially most of the resources of Iraq, could only be a platform for Iranian influence. And that would be considered as a threat to U.S. interests in the whole area. That's why I don't think that Washington is happy with this specific clause. But Washington is not in a position to prevent the Shi'ites from moving forward in that direction, and now you have that in the constitution.

And suppose the Shi'ites decide to apply this aspect of the constitution which now has been adopted, and proclaim an autonomous region. Do you think that Washington troops will prevent them from doing that? That's quite impossible. And therefore, to say that U.S. troops are preventing the break-up of the country, is not convincing. What is preventing the break-up of the country is the fact that they realize it would be very costly for everybody. That it wouldn't be in their interest, the common interest of the Iraqi people.

The Kurdish people are very much entitled to an independent state if they wished so. Because they are a different nation, they should have, as any nation, the right to self-determination-and not only in the Iraqi part of Kurdistan, but also in the Turkish part of Kurdistan the Iranian part, the Syrian part.

And the Kurds had a referendum in Kurdistan, with almost a unanimous vote in favor of independence, and the Kurdish leaderships know that their constituency wants independence very badly, and are not happy at all that the constitution did not provide for the right of the Kurds to self-determination, including forming a separate state, if they wished so.

Despite all that, they keep telling the constituency-you have to be patient, the day will come when Kurdistan will become independent, officially independent (because, factually speaking, Kurdistan has been functioning as a more or less independent state since 1991). They keep saying, you have to be patient because now the conditions are not right for any proclamation of independence, if we did so, we would face terribly difficult conditions, we have the Turkish threat. Turkey has repeatedly, as you just said, threatened to intervene if that would happen. They would have more to lose from proclaiming the independence right now than whatever they could win. So that's what prevents the Kurds from breaking away officially as a state.

And as for the Shia and the Sunnis-the picture that people can get sometimes from the media is distorted. I mean, you don't have a country where you have purely Shi'ite areas. The Kurds are a different situation-you have three provinces which are Kurdistan-geographically, culturally. But you don't have a Shi'ite country and a Sunni country.

You have provinces with a Sunni majority, provinces with Shi'ite majority, even sometime large majorities-but you have also some mixed provinces, you even have tribes that are mixed religiously; you have a lot of intermingling between communities.... And Baghdad is a city where you have all of them represented. And the Shi'ites know that if they were to secede in some formal manner, that would not only mean a costly civil war-bloody for everybody, including them-but they would be faced with hostility from the Arab environment.

The Shi'ite leadership, in my view, are completely aware that it is not all in their interest to split up the country and then face this prospect of ethnic cleansing, to use the term used since Bosnia, a very costly civil war, and then facing a hostile Arab environment, and being dependent on Iranian friendship. The Arab Shi'ites have their own pride and consider, they don't like to be dependent on Iran, contrary to what is pretended by some people.

BW: There is at least one faction of the Shi'ites which is very pro-Iran, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution...

GA: Well, the Supreme Council has been linked closely to Iran, but they are not-you know, between quotation marks-"agents" of Iran. They don't have the type of relation you used to have between Communist parties and the Soviet Union. That's not how they look at Iran-not at all. As I said, they have their pride. I mean, Arab Shiites take pride in belonging to the nation that produced the prophet of Islam and produced Ali, the main reference of the Shi'ites.

I don't claim to be an oracle, and anyone claiming to know what will happen, is just, you know, a worthless pretension. But on the basis of a rational evaluation of what exists, one might reasonably think that the incentive for a renewed formula for building a common state would be very strong.

But as I said, one thing is clear: it's not the presence of U.S. troops which is preventing the deterioration of the situation. General Casey, he himself said the presence of the occupation fuels the insurgency, that was in hearings with the Senate.

THE NEO-CON AGENDA

BW: And then there's also the sort of conspiracy theory that there's this maximalist neo-con agenda to intentionally divide Iraq...

GA: Well, that was Plan B for the neo-cons. Plan B for the neo-cons, and also for the friends of Sharon's government in Israel, who wouldn't be sad to see a break-up of Iraq and even a civil war, among the various Iraqi factions, in the same way that Washington was quite happy to see Iran and Iraq fighting each other for eight years.

We know what role Washington played in the Iran-Iraq war: every time you had one side weaker, Washington would give some kind of support to this weaker side, so that it would sustain the war. And Kissinger at that time wrote a frank article saying that our interest is that they destroy each other, for as long as possible. So the same kind of logic is applied to Iraq by the Sharon government and its U.S. friends among the neo-cons.

And the neo-cons have been influential in shaping the invasion and the post-invasion aftermath of the invasion-but just for the first seven months. After which it proved such a disaster, and all the blueprints that they had prepared proved so far from the reality on the ground, that the Bush administration had to change course in Iraq. You have had disputes on the scenario between the State Department and the CIA on the one hand and the Pentagon on the other hand...

BW: With the Pentagon taking more of an ambitious neo-con position?

GA: Sure. The removal of Paul Wolfowitz is an indication of a change...

BW: So you do think there's been a retreat within the Pentagon, from this kind of position?

GA: Oh, I think the signs for that are quite many. And on the ground, that was represented by the clash between Bremer and Chalabi, who used to be Washington's Iraqi stooge when the neo cons were influencing most directly the policy for Iraq. Another sign is the replacement of Chalabi with Allawi; Allawi was a CIA buddy and represented the other scenario-which the state department and CIA before the invasion were supporting and which was discarded.

And then when the neo-con scenario proved a failure, they went back to the Allawi scenario-although it was in a sense too late, because this scenario demanded the collaboration of a substantial fraction of the Ba'athist apparatus, whereas the blueprint of the neo-cons and Chalabi was for total dismantlement of the old state apparatus, and building from scratch a new state apparatus-a small army, neutral state, some kind of Arab Switzerland, friendly to Israel. And this was completely wild...

BW: That was the neo-cons' Plan A, and then their Plan B was actually to divide Iraq...?

GA: Yeah, Plan B would be the splitting of Iraq. But this Plan B does not conform to the fundamental interests of U.S. imperial hegemony. It would be absolutely risky, even disastrous for U.S. interests in the area. Why so? Because on the one hand, the Shia, as an independent entity, would much more likely be allied to Iran than to Washington; and secondly, that would destabilize the whole area, and be an incentive for the secession of the Shia province in Saudi Arabia (or the Saudi kingdom-I don't like to say "Saudi Arabia"; the kingdom is Saudi, it is the name of a dynasty, not a country). And it so happens that they are also the areas of the Saudi kingdom where the oil reserves are concentrated. So, this is a nightmarish scenario for, for Washington.

BW: There's also the question of Turkish intervention.

GA: Of course. And all that would also lead to terrible consequences in the level of the oil market. So although the neo-cons might consider that partition of Iraq is a good thing, the fundamental interests of Washington, on which you have a bipartisan consensus in the U.S. ruling class, would definitely consider that to be a disaster.

THE QUESTION OF SOLIDARITY

BW: A real important question for me is who are the forces in Iraq that we can loan some solidarity to? Do you see any forces on the horizon which really present a progressive, secular alternative?

GA: What is tragic in the whole area actually, left wing, progressive, emancipatory forces are quite marginal, and as a product of historical defeat-or even bankruptcy because of very wrong policies in some cases-the overwhelming forces in the mass movement have been of a very different nature, mainly Islamic fundamentalist forces.

Iraq is a country where you have had historically a very powerful communist party with a tradition of building workers' movements and all that, and one would have hoped that this would at least lead to an survival of a progressive current-but the problem is that the communist party joined the governing council set up by Bremer and ruined its credibility as an anti-imperialist force by doing so. Although they had opposed the war officially before it took place. And as a consequence that they had a very poor result in the elections in January. They waged a dynamic electoral campaign, but they got ridiculous results, less than 1% of the vote. And this is a party that at one point in the late '50s could mobilize 1 million people in the streets. I mean, this was a total disaster.

BW: And you attribute this to what, this decline?

GA: I attribute it to the sheer opportunism of the leadership of this party. And this same opportunism has now led them to join Allawi's slate; now they're part of the slate of Washington's stooge-man in the coming elections in December.

BW: And what had been their posture towards Saddam when he was in power?

GA: Well, they, at the beginning, when the Ba'athist coup d'état occurred in '68, they tried to collaborate with the Ba'athists-although the Ba'athists were repressing very violently a splinter group from the Communist Party, which was actually one of the reasons why this coup was organized: to liquidate this Guevarist guerilla struggle in southern Iraq, which was started by a guerilla-ist Iraqi who came back from Britain and went to start some kind of foco war...

BW: Indeed? Against who, exactly?

GA: Well, against the Iraqi bourgeois state.

BW: But there had been some sort of left-nationalist regime in power before the Ba'athist coup, no?

GS: Yes, but we were at times of radicalization in the Arab world, and even Nasserism was considered as being bourgeois. I mean, Nasser was the man who led Egypt between '54 and his death in 1970, who was a champion of Arab nationalism and anti-imperialism, anti-feudalism-and even that was considered at this time of the radicalization as being bourgeois and had to be overthrown. So these were different times.

BW: Who was the leader of this Guevarist faction?

GA: Khaled Ahmed Zaki. A well-known figure, but he was killed even before the Ba'athists took over. He made the same calculation that Guevara made in Bolivia in '67. He thought that he could draw a segment of the Communist Party, knowing that it had a real network and apparatus in the country, to radicalize and support his armed struggle, and that would join with the Kurdish liberation struggle, and this combination could lead to a revolutionary seizure of power in Baghdad.

That's the calculation he was making at the time. And you had a split in the Communist Party; you had a left-wing faction which hooked up with the guerilla. But the Ba'athist coup d'état crushed this wing of the Communist Party, and so the other wing, the majority wing of the Communist Party-the pro-Moscow wing-trying to collaborate with the Ba'athists, and even entered their government for a while in the early '70's. This was not only opportunist but, I would say, criminal-how can you join with such a criminal, repressive government, if you claim to be the representative of the working class? But it was even stupid, very short-sighted-because anyone would know that at some point the Ba'athists would get rid of them. Especially when Saddam Hussein concentrated power into his hands.

BW: So what did happen to the Communist Party when Saddam concentrated power?

GA: They were crushed severely, in their turn.

BW: That would have been in the 80's?

GA: The late 70's. Along with any kind of political entity independent from the Ba'athists. Saddam Hussein's brand of Ba'athism was quite totalitarian in the full sense of this term...

BW: And yet, the Communist Party survived as a party.

GA: Well, it survived as a party in exile. Don't forget that you had four million Iraqis in exile under Saddam Hussein. That's a huge number. Remember, we're not dealing with a population of 200 million, like in the U.S. ... So, it's a huge proportion of the population who were forced into exile by this absolutely ruthless, bloody, totalitarian dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.

Not to mention the crazy wars he waged later on, against Iran. So the Communist Party survived with a very weakened underground network in the country. But mainly the network was kept alive in exile, and they went back after the fall of Saddam Hussein. And their attitude since then has ruined completely their credentials as a progressive force.

You have another left-wing organization, which is called the Worker Communist Party of Iraq, which originates in a Kurdish group, the Komale, which was present in both the Iranian and Iraqi parts of Kurdistan. They were mainly based in Kurdistan under the dictatorship, and after '91 when Kurdistan became an autonomous area, their main constituency was there.

They had some frictions and clashes with the mainstream Kurdish leaderships. And after the fall of Saddam Hussein, they moved to establish offices and activities in other parts of Iraq, mainly Baghdad, but their basic constituency is Kurdish. And they have a discourse which is very violently opposed to all Islam-not only Islamic fundamentalism. They have formulas that would be provocative for ordinary Muslim believer, I would say.

BW: Such as what?

GA: They denounce Islamic fundamentalist forces, but they don't take the necessary precaution of

clearly making a distinction between these currents and the religion of Islam. And therefore they might appear as an anti-religious group. And they also reject nationalism-and this is not only a Kurdish rejection of Arab nationalism; actually they mean all nationalism, including Kurdish nationalism...

BW: They actually seem to draw leadership from an Iranian thinker, Hekmat Mansoor...

GA: Yeah, as I said, the group was originally in both parts of Kurdistan, and then when they created two communist parties, they decided that they were no longer Kurdish groups, but an Iranian and an Iraqi group, addressing the whole population of Iran and the whole population of Iraq.

This group, in my view, doesn't have much prospect of growth because of what I would consider to be a rather sectarian way of dealing with things. But they organized activities on the women issue, and a trade union movement. I mean, when you look at the landscape in Iraq, they are much more progressive than most of what you've got.

What I think would be worth support in Iraq is the Oil & Gas Workers Union, in Basra, in southern Iraq. Why so? First of all, it's much easier to organize support for a union than a very radical kind of group. And this is a genuine union, a genuinely autonomous union, not the off-shoot of any party. And among them, you have all kinds of ideologically-minded people; some might be a supporter of the Shi'ite parties, some might be coming from a communist tradition or whatever.

And they are in a very sensitive position because the oil industry is the main resource of Iraq, and that's the main target of the occupation, of course. Therefore I think they deserve strong support in their fight, which is presently concentrated on the issue of privatization, opposing the privatization plans or designs concerning the oil industry...

BW: What are the roots of this union? Did it exist under Saddam? Or has it come into existence since the fall of Saddam?

GA: No, it came into existence after... Whatever you had in Iraq as an autonomous workers' movement had been crushed in the most bloody way by the Ba'ath... I mean, even before Saddam took over completely as the leader. Any time you had an attempt at a strike or anything like that-you would have Ba'athist thugs coming on with machine guns and mowing down the workers...

BW: As I understand it, there are three trade union movements in Iraq now: There's the oil workers in Basra, and there's the entity which seems to be linked to the Worker Communist Party, which is the Federation of Worker Councils and Trade Unions. And then there's a third, the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions, which is-at least according to the Worker Communist Party-collaborationist, and dealing with the regime.

GA: This third one is led by the Iraqi Communist Party, and you even have some people from Allawi's group in its leadership, although the real organizers are communist. Well, I think this is a real union. It doesn't have to be judged on the political positions of the party leading it. It has to be judged on what it does for the workers' cause. I would say that one should support all struggles wherever they occur, and whoever leads them, if they are just struggles... One hopes, at least, that this country will reach a situation where you can have real social struggles instead of the kind of civil war that looms on the horizon.

THE IMPERATIVE FOR MOVEMENT-BUILDING

BW: Any closing words? Particularly in terms of the way forward for anti-war forces in the United States?

GA: One should be aware of the very crucial importance of building a strong anti-war movement within the United States. The United States government is going to be faced with an increasingly difficult situation in Iraq. My prognosis for next year is that it will be very tough for Washington. The Shi'ite alliance is renewing its demand of a timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. troops-a central demand which was put aside after they had to cut a deal with the Kurdish alliance in order to form a government.

And that compromise was opposed vehemently by the partisans of al-Sadr, who are now part of the alliance, and even in the government. They petitioned in the national assembly, and collected a very significant number of signatures of MP's-over 120-demanding the government place a timetable for the withdrawal of occupation troops... And I think the Sadrists can be expected to be still more active than what they have been until now, on this issue... You remember on April 9 of this year, there was a huge demonstration in Baghdad against the occupation, where they burned puppets representing George Bush, Tony Blair...and Saddam Hussein.

BW: This was the al-Sadr people?

GA: Yes.

BW: But they also have representatives in the Parliament?

GA: In the Parliament and even in the government. Yes, sure. And they will push strongly for a withdrawal within in the Shi'ite alliance.

BW: And is the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution also in this alliance?

GA: The Supreme Council is the major force in the alliance. The alliance is basically the Supreme Council, the Sadrists, and other groups like the Dawa Party. But the two major forces are the Supreme Council...

BW: And Sadr.

GA: And Sadr. And they both have their own militias.

BW: They were opposed. They made some kind of reconciliation?

GA: I mean, they are rivals. But at the same time, they can consider that it's in their interest not to split their constituency and try to find some kind of agreement. Because actually they have more in common than what separates them. Both are Islamic fundamentalist, both are Shi'ite organizations.

One is more radical than the other in its attitude toward the occupation, but the Supreme Council views the U.S. presence in a tactical way, believing, as Iran does also, that they are making use of the U.S.-they made use of the U.S., to topple Saddam Hussein, their arch-enemy, and they are now taking advantage of the presence of U.S. troops to build up their forces, to build an Iraqi state under their control, until they reach time when they will ask the occupation to leave the country...

Washington will be very strongly backing Allawi; the Kurds don't need backing in the election because their constituency will vote for them anyhow. But Washington wishes that Allawi this time-

contrary to his defeat in January, when he only had 14% of the vote-will be able to lead a more significant faction in the Parliament, powerful enough to be able to exert some kind of veto power, with the Kurds. So we'll see what the December election brings-one never knows in Iraq. But it's very likely that we are heading towards even tougher times for Washington in Iraq than what we've seen until now. And with the kind of administration we've got in Washington, the worst is possible; facing adversity, they might react in a very violent, vicious manner...

BW: You mean the White House?

GA: Yeah, absolutely. We see how they have increased regional tension, they have built up the threats against Iran, against the Hezbollah in Lebanon, against the Syrian regime. And they know perfectly that the Shi'ite alliance in Iraq is led by forces who have in common with Iran not only Shi'ism, but also, in the final analysis, hostility toward a continued U.S. presence in Iraq.

Washington went into this war at a huge cost for the United States-whether in human lives or economically, the cost has been huge, absolutely huge. To withdraw from Iraq and lose everything would be a terrible defeat of strategic proportions, for the United States. So, this administration could very well be tempted, faced with adversity, to react very wildly...

BW: Meaning what?

GA: I mean, everything is possible. Military action against Iran. Turning their weapons also against the Shi'ites, if the Shi'ites radicalize against the occupation. And therefore you could have a much greater bloodbath in Iraq than what we have seen until now, which is already something.

And this is where the U.S. anti-war movement comes into the picture. I can refer you to the example of Vietnam. When Washington was faced with great difficulty in coping with Vietnamese resistance to the occupation, there was a temptation at some point to use nuclear arms. And a study was commissioned from the CIA about what it would entail. And the main argument that was published recently in the archives, was that the use of nuclear arms would not be accepted by the U.S. population.

So the anti-war movement in the United States, the anti-war feeling that was building up at that time, were instrumental in preventing the worst in Vietnam-the use of nuclear arms, or those threats by Nixon to inundate North Vietnam at one point.

BW: Inundate?

GA: Yeah, by destroying dams. So, if we want to avoid seeing this administration trying to remain in control of Iraq by resorting to disastrous type of measures, it is definitely crucial that there is a strong, powerful anti-war movement in this country. And already it is very much encouraging to see the level of the polls, the radical shift in public opinion in the United States, but the shift in the polls is not enough. You need to translate that into a powerful, grassroots, autonomous movement, and maintain the pressure very strongly.

P.S.

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