

New turbulence, new transformations in the Middle East

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With the threats to bomb Iran, the victory of Hamas in Palestine and the 'low intensity' civil war in Iraq, the Middle East is going through new turbulence and transformation. Gilbert Achcar talked to State of Nature online magazine.

SoN-: With the recent rise in sectarian violence in Iraq, the suspicion that the U.S. is fostering civil strife in order to delay the withdrawal of its troops has gained strength. What is your response to this?

GA: In a sense, this has been the case from the very beginning of the occupation. The United States chose what it thought would be a comfortable position, that of an arbiter between various contending factions and components of the Iraqi population. And this choice translated into the way they formed the institutions, very much based on a distribution of power and seats between the three major components of the population: the Kurds, the Arab Shia and the Arab Sunni.

The situation in the country has actually worsened very much since last year, when the United States started losing its grip on the local institutions as a result of the January election. The elected assembly was no longer under full U.S. control and since then we have seen increasingly frenzied attempts by the occupier at using whatever differences and divisions there are among Iraqis. This is the very old imperial recipe of 'divide and rule'.

What do you think this will lead to? Are we talking of the division of the country between the three groups? Or do you think the U.S. is not ready for that alternative at the moment?

That would certainly not be a first option, and I even doubt that it would really be a second best option for the United States, if only for the simple reason that it would lead to some kind of Shia state controlling the bulk of Iraq's oil. Such a state could only be a close ally of Iran and would unleash a dangerous dynamic for the whole area, including the Saudi Kingdom where the main oil producing area is inhabited by a Shia majority. This is definitely not a scenario that suits Washington's interests. Moreover, it would destabilise the whole area and have very dangerous consequences for the global economy, as it would of course immediately affect the price of oil which has already started skyrocketing in the last couple of years.

So I don't believe that the partition scenario - although it has been formulated or favoured by some people, especially in some neo-con circles, as a Plan B for Iraq - is something that Washington could seriously consider as representing a favourable outcome for U.S. interests.

How will Hamas be transformed by its electoral victory?

It's quite hard to say because it depends on many factors, including the official reaction of the U.S. and Europe. For the time being they are testing or still pondering the different positions they could take. It also depends on how Israel will behave.

But what I would say is that in light of what Hamas is, the way it has built its own victory, the kind of programme it embodies, I can hardly see as likely the rosy scenario that some people, out of wishful thinking, believe to be possible - that Hamas will just adapt to what they deem to be the 'reality' and join the so-called 'peace process' in some way. I don't think that it will be the case, because I don't think that Hamas would be willing to just abandon its political identity with such speed and for nothing real in exchange.

And I don't think that the rosy scenario is possible, mainly because there is presently in Israel a very stubborn, very right-wing kind of majority and government and, in reality, Sharon and his followers in power are people who are, at the bottom of it, quite happy with this situation. It provides them with a pretext to go forward with their unilateral moves, shaping the 'final settlement' that suits them.

The U.S., EU and Israeli response to the Hamas victory has been to threaten diplomatic isolation and the cessation of funds for the Palestinian Authority. Iran has reacted by pledging its own financial assistance and calling for other Muslim nations to follow suit. Recent reports in the Arab Press, although denied by Hamas, claim that Iran will give as much as \$250 million to the Hamas-led government. What is the significance of all this?

Well, it just shows that the attempt at isolating Hamas, which actually means not isolating Hamas as such, but the elected government of the Palestinian people, will just backfire. It is obvious that the victory of Hamas in Palestine is also a major victory for Iran, for Syria, for all the adversaries of the United States in that part of the world. They are quite happy with this victory, and Iran has thus been provided with another political card in the area and is already using it.

Iran was actually supporting Hamas long before the last election and Hamas reciprocated by coming out in solidarity with Iran after the recent provocative statements of the Iranian President. A few weeks before the election, Hamas proclaimed its support to the Iranian President and Khaled Meshaal, the Hamas leader who lives in exile in Damascus, went to Tehran to confirm this support.

The Iranian government is saying that it is going to supply Hamas with what the Palestinian people need in terms of financial backing, and that's why even the Arab clients of the United States find themselves put in a corner and compelled to enter into this outbidding with Tehran - because they are very much afraid that Tehran might appear as the only supporter of Hamas.

They feel that they must support Hamas, because they know that the Arab public opinion in this kind of confrontation between Hamas on the one hand and Israel and Europe on the other will, of course, stand fully on the side of Hamas.

The Lebanese organisation Hezbollah is credited with expelling Israel from Lebanon. To what extent can we say that their victory inspired support for Hamas in Palestine?

The impact of the Hezbollah victory is real in the sense that the Hezbollah fight against the occupation definitely played a major role in getting Israel to evacuate southern Lebanon in the year 2000. This victory played a role at the time in enhancing the political appeal of Hamas, especially when contrasted with the dead-end reached by the Oslo process and the great disillusionment about it, as well as about the Arafat leadership that had betted on that process.

The year 2000 was the year when you had the Camp David negotiations with Clinton, Barak and

Arafat, the dead-end there on the condition of the final settlement, and then in September of the same year, the provocation by Ariel Sharon in Jerusalem which facilitated his own electoral victory in February 2001. All this precipitated a kind of radicalisation in the stances of both sides; the Israeli side of course and the Palestinian side with the outburst of the 'Second Intifada'.

The victory of Hamas is the direct outcome of this political framework, to which of course should be added factors that have been emphasised by every observer and which are so obvious, especially the deep corruption of the Palestinian Authority in contrast to the reputation of Hamas as an organisation dedicated to social services and to serving the people.

Yes, very similar to Hezbollah in that sense.

Again yes, very similar to Hezbollah. But all this does not mean, of course, that Hamas owes its victory to the Hezbollah. The Hezbollah factor played a role in enhancing the political appeal of Hamas, but even if you had no Hezbollah at all, I believe that Hamas would have won nevertheless, because of the dynamics on the Palestinian and Israeli scene.

Condoleezza Rice has requested \$75 million this year to fund opposition groups in Iran. She has claimed the U.S. has a "menu of options" for dealing with Iran. What are these options? Which one will the U.S. ultimately take?

My guess is that Washington itself would not be able to tell you which option they will ultimately take, because in a sense all options are quite risky and they have to consider a lot of factors: Iranian factors, Iraqi factors, regional factors beyond Iraq and Iran, and international factors. This issue is very complicated because Iran is a much harder nut to crack than Iraq was, at least with regard to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, which was by far the easiest part of the game.

Overthrowing the Iranian regime is a much more difficult objective, first of all simply because Washington cannot invade Iran: this country is much bigger than Iraq and when we see the quagmire the U.S. is facing already in Iraq, we understand that it is out of the question that it invades Iran on top of it.

Regime change in the Iraqi fashion is therefore practically out of the question for Iran, all the more so because the Iranian regime does indeed have a real social base. The recent elections which led to the victory of Ahmedinejad were not phoney elections, they were not fake or anything of the kind. Of course, it was a confrontation between two pillars of the same regime, and the range of political forces that were allowed to take part in the political process was strictly limited, but it was a real contest nevertheless.

The outcome reflected the fact that the Iranian regime still had a real social base that could be mobilised by some dose of populism; it is still able to appeal to the nationalist sentiment of the public.

The more Washington attacks the Iranian regime politically, the better it is for it in fact. This explains why Ahmedinejad, who is less crazy than what he is thought to be in the West, keeps provoking the United States and Israel. He knows exactly what he is doing, because this strengthens his hand at home and in the whole Muslim world, where statements of this kind find a wide popular approval.

If Washington were to go beyond threats and strike militarily at Iran, aside from the fact that the military outcome of such strikes would not be guaranteed in any way, it could unleash a strong wave of protest and further radicalisation of the situation in the whole area, not only in Iran. It is therefore

a very delicate and dangerous situation for the United States.

But on the other hand, Washington believes that if Iran succeeded in getting the nuclear weapon, it would be a very dangerous development for U.S. interests in the whole area as Iran would be in possession of a much stronger deterrent, and accordingly a much enhanced ability to manoeuvre and act politically in the region.

So I am sure that in Washington they are considering every kind of option, of course, but there is no option in terms of military aggression that they could try light-heartedly. For the time being, they are still trying to use this stick-and-carrot, bad cop, good cop tactic with Europe, Russia and so on in order at least to delay as long as possible whatever efforts the Iranians could be making at the nuclear level, in the hope that the situation might change again internally in Iran and that there could be a renewed rise of some anti-regime opposition in Iran.

That's what Condoleezza Rice's statements were about actually: they mean that Washington is not able to change the regime from outside as it did in Iraq, so its only option is to try to change it from inside by supporting opposition forces.

But the problem for them is that any opposition that is directly supported by the U.S. is discredited. Whatever changes took place in Iran before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, it is a fact that since then the image of the United States has been deteriorating very rapidly in light of the quagmire in Iraq and the confrontation over the nuclear issue with Tehran.

How would you define the relationship between Iran and Russia?

Iran is an important asset for the Russians: Moscow is left with a much reduced range of allies and client states and has not been paid back by the U.S. with any kind of concessions despite the very cooperative attitude that Putin showed the Bush administration, after 9/11 especially. In light of that, Russia is trying to reassert its own zone of influence and has again tightened its strategic relations with China.

In Central Asia, Russia has again been involved in a direct competition with the United States, trying to contain its influence and roll it back after it entered that part of the world in the wake of 9/11 and the invasion of Afghanistan. We've seen, for example, how they recently got Uzbekistan to cancel the air base that it had leased to the United States. In that general framework Russia's relationship with Iran is very important.

But on the other hand, Russia is economically very dependent on its relations with Germany, and since Germany is also very concerned about the Iranian issue and exerting pressure, Putin and the Russian government are trying to conciliate all these factors and pressures. But ultimately I think that Iran is of such a strategic importance that Russia won't break with Tehran, especially not in this situation where the wind is blowing in a direction quite contrary to U.S. interests in the Middle East.

A few weeks ago Khaled Meshaal from Hamas visited Turkey. This was followed by the Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari and in the next few days the Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr will be arriving in Ankara. How do you interpret this busy traffic? What role is Turkey aiming to play in the Middle East?

Well, these three visits, or in other words the Iraqi issue and the Palestinian issue, are not exactly the same. Hamas of course is trying hard to build up some diversified network of international links, which they never cared seriously about before.

Since they are facing a threat of ostracism from Western countries, they are very much trying to

build up relations that go beyond those governments with whom they can have 'natural' relations, i.e. governments at odds with the U.S. So the visit to Turkey is important for them since Turkey is a NATO country, an official ally of the United States, and at the same time the ruling party is Islamic.

The Turkish government welcomed Hamas, I am sure, with a green light from Washington, which is mobilising its Muslim allies, the Saudis and the rest, hoping that they persuade Hamas to make the concessions that are required from it in order to enter the political process.

For Iraq the issue is quite different. There is a sharpening confrontation between the Shia and the Kurds. The Kurdish alliance is the main and most reliable ally of Washington in Iraq and recently it has increasingly been confronting the Shia alliance, the majority of which is now composed of the alliance between Moqtada al-Sadr and Jaafari - as you know, Moqtada al-Sadr supported Jaafari in getting the Shia alliance's nomination for the post of prime minister.

For the second time since the January 2005 election, the Kurdish alliance is trying very hard to impose the participation in the forthcoming government of Allawi, Washington's other key ally and stooge in Iraq, although he is now much weaker than last year. The Kurdish forces are trying that, both against the will of the Shia alliance and against the will of Tehran, which is very much opposed to Allawi.

All these power games that are going on are linked to the Iraqi visits to Turkey. As everyone knows, Ankara is very concerned about the Kurdish alliance in Iraq: the Shia are therefore trying to get Turkey to exert pressure on the Arab Sunnis in order to disassociate them from the Kurds, because in the confrontation between the Kurds and the Shia, the Arab Sunnis are currently trying to better their own chances and to get a large piece of the cake by allying with the Kurds. This general framework also explains why the Kurdish alliance has reacted so violently to Jaafari's visit to Turkey.

Islamic fundamentalism has become the main form of anti-imperialist resistance in the Middle East. Is there any hope for a left-wing or progressive nationalist anti-imperialist revival in this region?

First of all I wouldn't label Islamic fundamentalism as 'anti-imperialist'. Anti-imperialism is a label that I reserve for forces which think in such categories. But Islamic fundamentalists, if we mean by that the most fanatical brands, the likes of Bin Laden, Zargawi and the rest, do not use such terms.

They say they are fighting the Crusaders and the Jews, using that kind of vocabulary which reveals a very racist and fanatically religious conception of the world. And although they are fighting the main oppressor of the peoples in that part of the world, they are at the same time, especially with regards to their social programme and views, a very reactionary kind of current.

Iraq is a good illustration of this, because there Zargawi is not only waging a war against the occupation, which one might consider, at least objectively speaking, a legitimate war, but he is also waging a very murderous, sectarian kind of war, which by any standard is utterly and extremely reactionary.

Of course, we cannot put this kind of fanatical fundamentalism in the same category as Hamas or Hezbollah or other such organisations with a real mass base. These organisations are really leading the mass struggle of their own national or religious constituencies against their major foreign oppressor, despite their reactionary social and political views that are a calamity for the true long-term interests of the masses. Of course, this is the outcome of the historical bankruptcy of the progressive forces in that part of the world, and at the same time also an outcome of the fact that Islamic fundamentalism has been used so intensively to fight all these progressive currents for many

decades, chiefly by the United States itself actually.

Now, how could we get a different kind of situation? Well, first of all one should stress the fact that a progressive struggle against imperialism is still possible on a world level, and Latin America provides the best proof for that.

The fact that it is possible there and not in the Middle East for the time being is probably due to a large extent to the presence of a still widely popular Cuba.

Because of Cuba, the whole idea of revolution and socialism has not been discredited in Latin America in the way that it has been in the rest of the Western world and the East. The fact that the image of Cuba is still overwhelmingly positive for Latin Americans helps to leave real room for a revival of left-wing forces.

As for the Middle East, I am afraid that it will take a long historical period before we can get back to a situation where progressive forces will head the expression of mass resentment and discontent.

This would take the historical reversal of the two processes that I have mentioned, that is, firstly, for the fundamentalist movement to get, in its turn, discredited and reach a state of blatant bankruptcy the way that progressive nationalism and left-wing forces did. For the time being though Islamic fundamentalism is still on the offensive and achieving victories. I am sure that this won't be the case forever, but it may take many years before the trend is reversed.

Secondly, there is a need to build a new credibility for a left-wing alternative. I don't see any possibilities in the foreseeable future for any section of the left in that part of the world to achieve the kind of success that would accomplish that. It might be powerfully enhanced by experiences in other parts of the world, of course. Latin America is important, but it is quite far from the Middle East. I would say that developments in Europe are very important in that sense.

Whatever happens on the political scene in Europe will be very important in shaping the political conditions of the future in the Middle East or the Muslim world. This means that there is a need not only to see an important advance of left-wing forces in Europe, but also of left-wing forces that behave correctly in their relation with the Muslim population of immigrant origin in Europe and fight against Islamophobia, which is developing very rapidly in Western countries.

All this sets a lot of conditions and I'm afraid that, when one looks at all of that, one cannot be terribly optimistic. But I would say, using a very much used and even worn out formula, but one which remains valid, that in that part of the world, the optimism of the will can only be fostered presently by the pessimistic conviction that something worse could still happen and has to be prevented.

P.S.

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