

Iraq: Occupation, civil war and the call for withdrawal

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Susan Weissman: Gilbert Achcar teaches political science at the University of Paris and also works in Berlin. He contributes to various publications including Le Monde Diplomatique and Monthly Review. His recent books are "The Clash of Barbarisms", with a new edition coming out this year from Saqi books and Boulder Paradigm Publishers; "Eastern Cauldron" and "The Israeli Dilemma". He has also published (with Stephen R. Shalom), in the current "New Politics", an article on withdrawal from Iraq, which reacts to Representative John Murtha's position that called for immediate withdrawal but actually was about "redeployment." Gilbert, have you updated your position since then?

Gilbert Achcar: The longer the U.S. troops stay in Iraq, the worse the situation becomes. The situation is continuously deteriorating: In the last weeks we have seen again new stages in this deterioration, which are really very worrying. For people to say "Well, the U.S. troops should stay to prevent a civil war" is completely absurd.

On the one hand, we are steadily moving toward that kind of civil war because of the presence of the U.S. troops, and the timeline here is quite, quite clear. On the other hand, Rumsfeld himself said, "Well, if there is a civil war we won't intervene" -so what are U.S. troops for in that country?

SW: In effect the Bush Administration has been saying there's not yet a civil war, while [former Prime Minister Ayad] Allawi has said there is a civil war-can you just tell us, is there a semantic fine line here? Is there a civil war going on, or something building up?

GA: I've been saying for quite a long while now that in Iraq you've got low-intensity civil war. Recently the same formula has been used by the present prime minister of Iraq, Jaafari, whom the United States is trying to kick out.

Yes, this formula's accurate: What you've got there is not a full-fledged civil war-fortunately, because that would really be an absolute disaster. But there is a low-intensity civil war, and it's increasing in intensity. The presence of U.S. troops doesn't prevent it from unfolding, but is actually a main factor in fueling it.

The way the U.S. representative on the ground, Ambassador Khalilzad, has been behaving in the last year or so, is also very much part of what I am saying. He has been throwing oil on the fire continuously, trying to play one community against another, trying to get alliances and counter-alliances, trying to break other factions. He is interfering very, very heavily in the political situation, and not as some kind of honest broker, but as someone applying a very classical recipe of divide and rule.

That's what Washington has been left with as the means to keep its control over the situation in Iraq ever since it lost the electoral battles.

SW: President Bush went on the road to try to sell his message on the war and rather than

what I guess was expected-announcing a timed withdrawal to appease public opinion-he said "We're going to stay the course," and "We'll still be in Iraq after I leave office in 2008,." Does this announcement by Bush surprise you? Is there any alternative?

GA: First of all, it's not surprising that Bush says that. He means that U.S. troops won't leave Iraq as long as he's the president. And well, that's quite logical because he hasn't invaded that country just to withdraw from it after what has happened, after everything that has been spent there-not to mention of course the human cost, and here I'm speaking only of the American human cost. Of course the Iraqi human cost is much much higher.

If George W. Bush has led this invasion of Iraq it was to get control of the country and to stay there in the long run. That's why they are building bases, which are not built for the short time, but built and conceived as if they would be bases for a very long period. They went in Iraq quoting the examples of Germany and Japan after 1945 And that was the idea-to stay there for a very long time, let's say, at least until there is no more oil underground; getting control of that country for obvious economic and strategic reasons. Control over oil is an absolutely key weapon for world hegemony, and that's what this administration is very much obsessed with.

SW: We know that the Bush administration has scaled back from some of its most grandiose goals in the region, given the situation on the ground, but Seymour Hersh has written an article in the New Yorker a couple of months ago, saying we're going to switch to more of an air war, presumably to ease U.S. opposition so that fewer troops come home maimed and killed. Will Washington come up with some kind of plan to redeploy or pull out temporarily?

GA: Pulling out temporarily is not something likely to happen.

SW: Could they redeploy to the borders as Congressman John Murtha suggested?

GA: No, the idea of some Democrats and others is that the United States should redeploy and keep intervening militarily in the situation, mainly through air bases.

On the one hand that wouldn't improve the situation in Iraq; and on the other hand air wars, as you know, lead to the largest number of civilian casualties. That would be an even more selfish way of trying to control the area than what is happening now. And in a sense, it's even worse than what is happening.

SW: There's this sense that if the United States were to leave-now that the Ba'athists and Shi'ite militants are more organized than they were before, and that there's even splits within them with more radical elements within each sector, including the jihadists-that if there were even just redeployment or planned withdrawal, it would encourage them and all hell would break loose. And there's even the notion that maybe Turkey would invade, maybe Kuwait would try to reclaim...can you give us a kind of scenario of what you think could happen?

GA: One could imagine and draw all kinds of apocalyptic scenarios, but there is apocalypse now, we are in the midst of it. And of course, it could get worse...but it is getting worse. It is getting worse day after day. And it has been proved very very obviously, very factually, that the longer the U.S. troops stay in that country the worse it is getting.

No one can dispute that since day one of the invasion up until now the situation has steadily worsened-look at all the figures, it's absolutely terrible. The idea that the United States should stay

there even longer to prevent it from deteriorating is completely absurd. It's clear, it has been tried and tried and over-tried, and the conclusion is clear, the U.S. troops should get out of that country if that country is ever to recover.

Now, I'm not saying that it'll be paradise as soon as U.S. troops get out, that's not the point. We, the antiwar movement, were the people who were saying that if the invasion took place, it would lead to chaos. We were saying that during all the long period before the invasion. The invasion took place, and exactly what we predicted happened. It led to a chaotic situation, a very dangerous situation.

So now, the same people who were telling us "No, there won't be chaos, it'll be wonderful, U.S. troops will be welcomed with wreaths of flowers," and you would have some kind of new Switzerland in Iraq in a matter of a couple of years-the same people now say "Oh, the U.S. troops should not leave, because otherwise there will be chaos." This is ridiculous.

SW: There's also the position within the movement that the United States should provide a kind of Marshall Plan to repay for all of the damage, including the damage from the sanctions. What do you think is a viable position for the antiwar movement?

GA: The antiwar movement should, in my view, be organized, as it has been until now, around the central demand of "Out Now." This is more and more striking a real chord in public opinion. What we could call the "passive antiwar movement" that is reflected in the polls has increased tremendously in the recent period-you know that better than I do. But the organized antiwar movement has not been up to the task since the peak we reached on February 15, 2003.

After this huge, unprecedented, international, really truly mass mobilization, the movement lost impetus, you had a lot of confusion, and that of course was not helped by the kind of images coming from Iraq, unfortunately.

During the war in Vietnam, one factor in the mobilizations was how the images of oppressed Vietnamese, victims of the U.S. aggression, touched people's hearts. Antiwar demonstrators carried those pictures in the demonstrations.

The dominant images sent out from Iraq were images (of the resistance) the media chose to highlight-decapitation and other barbaric acts. This did not help to organize antiwar sentiment.

There was also the very complex situation on the ground. It is true that it's not such an easy situation to understand and to grasp.

P.S.

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