

The sinking ship of U.S. imperial designs

Sunday 13 August 2006, by [ACHCAR Gilbert](#) (Date first published: 6 August 2006).

"The defeat of Hezbollah would be a huge loss for Iran, both psychologically and strategically. Iran would lose its foothold in Lebanon. It would lose its major means to destabilize and inject itself into the heart of the Middle East. It would be shown to have vastly overreached in trying to establish itself as the regional superpower. The United States has gone far out on a limb to allow Israel to win and for all this to happen. It has counted on Israel's ability to do the job. It has been disappointed. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has provided unsteady and uncertain leadership.... His search for victory on the cheap has jeopardized not just the Lebanon operation but America's confidence in Israel as well."

Charles Krauthammer, Washington Post, August 4, 2006

"But the administration now has to admit what anyone — including myself — who believed in the importance of getting Iraq right has to admit: Whether for Bush reasons or Arab reasons, it is not happening, and we can't throw more good lives after good lives.... But second best is leaving Iraq. Because the worst option — the one Iran loves — is for us to stay in Iraq, bleeding, and in easy range to be hit by Iran if we strike its nukes.... We need to deal with Iran and Syria, but from a position of strength — and that requires a broad coalition. The longer we maintain a unilateral failing strategy in Iraq, the harder it will be to build such a coalition, and the stronger the enemies of freedom will become."

Thomas Friedman, New York Times, August 4, 2006

Everyday that passes shows more of those who enthusiastically supported the Bush administration's imperial drive in the Middle East leaving its sinking ship. There can be no doubt any longer that what many had forecast long ago is proving absolutely true: the Bush administration will definitely go down in history as the clumsiest crew that ever stood at the helm of the American Empire.

Bush and his cronies have already secured their position in the collective memory as the grave-diggers of U.S. post-Cold War imperial ambitions: they have accomplished the incomparable feat of squandering the exceptionally favorable conditions that U.S. imperialism faced since the other world colossus started crumbling from 1989 on. They have wasted the unique window of opportunity that the same Krauthammer quoted above had called in 1990 the "unipolar moment." But they have wasted it because they were inspired by precisely the same imperial hubris that has distinguished the likes of Krauthammer and Friedman.

The lead-article in a recent issue of *Time* magazine, published before the start of Israel's new Lebanon war, heralded "the end of cowboy diplomacy" — it took note of the obvious fact that "the Bush Doctrine foundered in the principal place the U.S. tried to apply it":

"Though no one in the White House openly questions Bush's decision to go to war in Iraq, some aides now acknowledge that it has come at a steep cost in military resources, public support and credibility abroad. The Administration is paying the bill every day as it tries to cope with other crises. Pursuing the forward-leaning foreign policy envisioned in the Bush Doctrine is nearly impossible at a time when the U.S. is trying to figure out how to extricate itself from Iraq. Around the world, both the U.S.'s friends and its adversaries are taking note — and in many cases, taking advantage — of the strains on the superpower. If the toppling of Saddam Hussein marked the high-

water mark of U.S. hegemony, the past three years have witnessed a steady erosion in Washington's ability to bend the world to its will." [1]

The authors' most serious grievance was stated as follows:

"As it turns out, Iraq may prove to be not only the first but also the last laboratory for preventive war. Instead of deterring the rulers in Tehran and Pyongyang, the travails of the U.S. occupation may have emboldened those regimes in their quest to obtain nuclear weapons while constraining the U.S. military's ability to deter them."

This very bitter assessment was accompanied in the *Time* article by the same hope that was shared by the large chorus of U.S. allies, protégés and clients: for all of them, with the outstanding exception of the Israeli government, the fact that the most prominent neocons of the Bush administration have been pushed aside nurtured the hope that a new salutary course of the administration's foreign policy was in gestation. The reshuffle that went along with George W. Bush's second term, despite the exit of realist-in-chief Colin Powell who, anyway, had quite limited influence on the administration, seemed indeed to confirm the "twilight of the neocons" that some Clintonites had announced two years ago. [2]

However, what the *Time* authors announced as marking the end of "cowboy diplomacy" — "a strategic makeover is evident in the ascendancy of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice" — proved to be no more than wishful thinking almost as soon as it was printed, in light of the events that unfolded subsequently as Israel launched its most brutal aggression. Cowboy diplomacy, it turned out, had just been replaced with cowgirl diplomacy — essentially the same.

True, Condoleezza Rice did her best to put some make-up on the face of the Bush administration's foreign policy, but there was no significant shift in substance. A pillar of this administration since its inception, she shares the same delusions of grandeur and folly of overreaching designs that characterize the rest of the team. Put in charge of the State department for Bush's second term, Rice's mission consisted primarily in sealing off the many leaks in the administration's foreign policy ship: it was indeed a mission impossible. The ship is sinking inexorably in the dark waters of the Iraqi oil slick.

The U.S. "hyperpower" that is able to knock down any other regular army on earth — the hyperpower whose military expenditure exceeds that of the 200+ states that constitute the rest of the world, and whose military budget alone exceeds the GDP of all other countries but for 14 of them — proved one more time in contemporary history that it is unable to control rebellious populations. For that, all the sophisticated killing gadgetry that the Pentagon possesses is of very limited help. Controlling populations involves troops: it is a kind of industry where labor-force can hardly be replaced with hardware. That is why, incidentally, dictatorships are relatively more at ease in this business, as they can mobilize at will from their populations and don't fear paying a high price in soldiers' lives.

The U.S. proved unable to control Vietnam with a much higher rate of occupation troops to inhabitants than is the case in Iraq. And yet, U.S. military power is today much greater than at the time of Vietnam in all respects except the one that is most crucial for occupation endeavors: troops. The number of U.S. troops has been radically cut since Vietnam and the end of the Cold War. Inspired by a spirit typical of the capitalism of the automation age, the Pentagon believed that it could make up for the unreliability of human resources by depending heavily on sophisticated weaponry — the so-called "revolution in military affairs." It thus entered in the age of "post-heroic" wars as they were aptly called by a maverick analyst of military affairs. [3] And, it did not take much trouble indeed for the U.S. to defeat "post-heroically" the Iraqi army of Saddam Hussein. Controlling

the Iraqi population “post-heroically,” however, proved an altogether different challenge.

The U.S. has been steadily losing control over Iraq ever since the occupation settled down in 2003. It was confronted, on the one hand, by the unfolding of an armed insurgency in the country’s Arab Sunni areas that proved impossible to quench with the limited number of U.S. occupation troops available. For, if an invading army is not capable of exerting control over every single acre of inhabited territory as local armed forces usually do, there is only one secure way to get rid of an armed insurgency moving within its popular constituency “like a fish in water” as Mao Zedong once put it: drain the pool. This means either to commit genocide, as the Russian army has started to do in Chechnya, or to displace the population into concentration camps, or a combination of the two as the U.S. tentatively practiced in Vietnam, but could not carry to conclusion because the American population wouldn’t have tolerated it.

In Iraq, Washington was faced, on the other hand, by a much graver problem, one that became clear by the beginning of 2004: the Bush administration had been induced — by its own foolishness and the sales patter of some of the Pentagon’s Iraqi friends or the stupid delusions of others — into believing that it could win the sympathy of a major chunk of Iraq’s majority community, the Arab Shiites. This proved a total disaster as the clout of Iran-friendly Shiite fundamentalist organizations completely dwarfed whatever constituency Washington’s henchmen could buy among Iraq’s Shiites. The Bush administration was left with no alternative for its imperial design but the classical recipe of “divide and rule,” trying to foster antagonism between the three main components of the Iraqi population, countering the Shiites with Arab Sunni forces in alliance with the Kurds. It ended up fueling Iraq’s slide toward a civil war, thus aggravating the overall spectacle of its failure in controlling the country. [4]

There is no doubt that the way in which the American Gulliver got tied down by the Iraqi Lilliputians has considerably emboldened Iran, the other Middle Eastern pillar of what George W. Bush labeled the “axis of evil” at the onset of his post-9/11 war drive. The utterly defiant, nay provocative, attitude of Iran against the U.S. colossus was made possible only because the latter proved in Iraq to stand on feet of clay. And Tehran countered successfully the attempt by Washington’s Arab clients to expand the sectarian feud from Iraq to the rest of the Arab region so as to isolate the Iranian regime as Shiite — a ploy that was used with some measure of success after the Iranian revolution of 1979. Tehran countered it by outbidding all the Arab regimes in hostility to Israel, thus building up its image as a champion of the pan-Islamic cause.

A key to Tehran’s success is the alliance that it weaved with Hamas, the most popular embodiment of Sunni Islamic fundamentalism. This alliance was enhanced when the largest section of the Muslim Brotherhood (of which Hamas is the Palestinian branch), the Egyptian section, came out openly in support of Iranian President Ahmadinejad’s provocative anti-Israel statements. Hamas’s accession to power through the January 2006 Palestinian election dealt a further blow to Washington’s regional strategy. Tehran jubilated, outbidding again all its Arab rivals in supporting the new Palestinian government. It is at this point that Israel stepped in, seen from Washington as the likely savior of what otherwise is looking more and more like an imperial Titanic.

One more time in four decades of strategic alliance between the U.S. sponsor and the Israeli champion, Washington, still believing in the Israelis’ old reputation of infallible know-how in dealing with their Arab foes, unleashed its favorite proxy against those that it deemed to be Iran’s proxies, namely Hamas and Hezbollah. What the Bush administration has overlooked, however, is that Israel’s reputation had already been very much eroded by its blatant failure in controlling the 1967-occupied Palestinian territories, and even more so by its Saigon-like withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, after 18 years of occupation. Israel has already met its own Vietnam in Lebanon.

And like the Pentagon after Vietnam, Israel's war planners have shifted since Lebanon to a "post-heroic military policy," relying much more on their very much superior hardware than on their ground troops' fighting capability. When it invaded Lebanon in 1982, Israel was chiefly fighting the PLO guerillas: in Lebanon, these were anything but "fish in water" as they had managed to alienate the Lebanese population through arrogant and clumsy behavior. The Lebanese resistance that gathered momentum from 1982 onward, and in which Hezbollah came to play the major role, was a completely different story: this was the Israeli army's first encounter with a truly popular armed resistance with lines of supplies on a terrain adequate for guerilla warfare. Israel faced the same dilemma described above with regard to Iraq and, like the U.S. in Vietnam, it was compelled to swallow the bitter cup of a withdrawal that was tantamount to defeat.

Israel's belief in the invincibility of its superior weaponry — with a hubris that was enhanced by the amateurship in military affairs of Olmert and Peretz, the present captains of its crew — led the Israelis to believe that they could force the Hezbollah into capitulation, or push the Lebanese to the brink of a new civil war, by taking the whole of Lebanon hostage, destroying the country's civilian infrastructure and pouring on its Shiite-populated areas a deluge of bombs. Israel deliberately flattened whole neighborhoods and villages on a pattern that resembles some of the bombings of WW2 — or a Fallujah on a much larger scale, and accordingly much more visible. Israel's new war on Lebanon displayed the murderous fury of an act of revenge against the only population that managed to oblige it to withdraw unconditionally from an occupied territory.

The criminal behavior of the Israeli armed forces in Lebanon, with regard to the international conventions defining what constitute war crimes, went beyond those that the U.S. perpetrated on a mass scale in its post-Vietnam military endeavors, whether in Iraq or in former Yugoslavia. In this, Israel's onslaught on Lebanon amounted to a peculiar instance of the so-called "extraordinary rendition" policy. It is well-known how Washington has handed over individuals it wants "interrogated" well beyond the limitation imposed by U.S. legislative constraints to those among its clients who face no hindrance in the dirty business of torture. Now Washington has entrusted to Israel the task of defeating Hezbollah, seen as a major piece in a regional counter-offensive against Iran, in the hope that Israel could do the dirty work and accomplish the task without incurring much trouble.

Shamelessly exploiting one more time the horrible memory of the Nazi judeocide — an exploitation which reached new peaks in indecency on the occasion of the ongoing war — Israel's leaders believed that they would thus be able to deflect any criticism from the Western powers a.k.a. "the international community." And although the resources for this exploitation are unmistakably depleting with every new threshold in brutality that Israel crosses, it is still effective indeed: any other state in the world that would have attacked a neighboring country, deliberately committing war crimes concentrated in time in the way Israel is doing in Lebanon would have brought upon itself an outcry of a magnitude that bears no relation to the faint or timid reproaches made to Israel on the theme that it is overdoing it.

But for all that, Israel's brutal aggression was not able to succeed. On the contrary, it has already proved to be what Ze'ev Sternhell described somewhat euphemistically as Israel's "most unsuccessful war" [5] concluding with this bitter statement:

"It is frightening to think that those who decided to embark on the present war did not even dream of its outcome and its destructive consequences in almost every possible realm, of the political and psychological damage, the serious blow to the government's credibility, and yes — the killing of children in vain. The cynicism being demonstrated by government spokesmen, official and otherwise, including several military correspondents, in the face of the disaster suffered by the Lebanese, amazes even someone who has long since lost many of his youthful illusions."

Far from inducing civil war between the Lebanese, Israel's brutal aggression only succeeded so far in uniting them in a common resentment against its murderous brutality. Far from forcing Hezbollah into surrender, it turned the Shiite fundamentalist organization into the most prestigious foe Israel ever had since it defeated Egypt in 1967, transforming Hezbollah's chief Nasrallah into the most popular Arab hero since Nasser. Far from facilitating the efforts by Washington and its Arab clients to drive the wedge further between Sunnis and Shiites, it led many prominent mainstream Sunni preachers to proclaim open support to Hezbollah, including preachers from within the Saudi kingdom — the ultimate humiliation for the Saudi ruling family. The Iraqis unanimously denounced the Israeli aggression, while Washington's most formidable Iraqi foe and Tehran's ally, Moqtada al-Sadr, seized the opportunity to organize another huge demonstration matching the one he organized against the occupation on April 9, 2005.

At the time of writing, Washington is still striving to buy Israel some more time by imposing unacceptable conditions for a UN Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire. And Israeli generals, faced with the total failure of their "post-heroic" bombing campaign, are engaged in a race against the clock in order to grasp, through an utterly destructive "post-heroic" ground offensive, as much as possible of southern Lebanese territory at the lowest possible cost in Israeli soldiers' lives.

But the most they can realistically expect now is to hand back this territory to an international force that would be accepted by Hezbollah. French President Jacques Chirac himself, though he's been Washington's close collaborator on the issue of Lebanon since 2004, has emphasized that Hezbollah's concurrence is a condition that must be met. No country on earth, to be sure, is willing to try to accomplish in Lebanon the mission that Israel itself is unable to fulfill. And the Shiite organization has already stated that it won't accept any force with a mandate going substantially beyond that of the already existing UNIFIL that Israel considers as a nuisance.

Whatever the final outcome of the ongoing war on Lebanon, one thing is already clear: instead of helping in raising the sinking ship of the U.S. Empire, the Israeli rescue boat has actually aggravated the shipwreck, and is currently being dragged down with it.

Notes

1. Mike Allen and Romesh Ratnesar, "The End of Cowboy Diplomacy," *Time*, dated July 17, 2006.
2. Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, "Twilight of the Neocons," *Washington Monthly*, March 2004.
3. Edward Luttwak, "A Post-Heroic Military Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 75, n° 4, July/August 1996.
4. I have described this process in *Perilous Power* (see bio line below). An excerpt on Iraq 2006 will soon be posted on the Internet.
5. Ze'ev Sternhell, "The Most Unsuccessful War," *Haaretz*, August 2, 2006.

P.S.

* Gilbert Achcar grew up in Lebanon and teaches political science at the University of Paris-VIII. His best-selling book *The Clash of Barbarisms* just came out in a second expanded edition and a book of his dialogues with Noam Chomsky on the Middle East, *Perilous Power*, is forthcoming, both from Paradigm Publishers. Stephen R. Shalom, the editor of *Perilous Power*, has kindly edited this article.