

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article54>



Middle East

An interview with Gilbert Achcar

- IV Online magazine - 2004 - IV360/1 - Autumn 2004 -

Publication date: Friday 1 October 2004

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

We reproduce here an interview Gilbert Achcar gave on May 5, 2004 to Jean-François Marquis which was published in the new Swiss monthly “La Brèche” (June 2004). We have completed it with four further questions to which he replied on June 28, 2004.

In early May 2003, President Bush organized a triumphal display on a US Navy aircraft carrier to announce the official end of combat in Iraq. One year later, how do you characterize the situation in this country?

What has happened confirms what we said right at the beginning of the invasion of Iraq: “The difficulties for Washington and London are only beginning”.

It was obvious in advance that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the military occupation of the country would not pose problems for the US army, taking into account the enormous disproportion of forces. But controlling a country like Iraq would be another question. The crushing technological superiority of the US army is not then as determinant.

First, you need a much greater number of soldiers than what is necessary for a simple military victory. Indeed the Bush administration thought it could occupy Iraq with a very limited number of soldiers. It is an Achilles heel of US power - the human factor, too quickly considered outdated following a technological revolution which has transformed the “art of war”.

Secondly, you need a controllable people, that is one which shows a certain degree of resignation to, indeed acquiescence with the occupation. This is far from being the case. The majority of Iraq's population has welcomed the US army with an attitude you could sum up thus: “You've overthrown Saddam Hussein, thanks. Now, get out, we don't want you as an occupying power”.

This sentiment is at the root of the movement of opposition to the occupation, which is snowballing and which is reflected almost daily in armed operations. In my opinion, it is not however this which is determinant. The most important factor is the massive character of the rejection of the occupation, shown, for example, by the huge demonstrations which took place during the struggle between proconsul Bremer and Grand Ayatollah Sistani on the question of the elections.

It is this which has dealt a blow to the Bush administration's project and has made Iraq into a “quagmire”. The US army is bogged down there and the situation can only worsen, without any perspective of honourable exit. In this sense, there are points of comparison with Vietnam. Not at the military level - there is no common measure between the Iraqi guerrillas and what happened in the Vietnam War - but at the political level. Like Vietnam, Iraq became an enormous ball and chain for the US ruling class. The US has already spent \$130 billion on their presence in Iraq, intent on gaining control over the considerable oil wealth of the country. But now they are not certain of being able to stay there.

How do you characterize the main economic measures imposed by the US in Iraq over the past year?

We can note at this level also a first US defeat. Washington has not yet been able to change the terms of the exploitation of Iraqi oil, which had been its fundamental objective.

The US did not launch this war for the processing or servicing industries which exist in Iraq. In this area, the Bremer administration has applied its programme to the letter, through privatization and giving markets to US companies without invitations to tender, including to the detriment of other US companies - which has led to numerous scandals.

But the US keeps putting off decisions on oil, precisely because of the hostility towards them in the country that they quickly had to take note of. Indeed, the more time passes, the greater the popular hostility which led them to put off the decisions increases.

The Bush administration's project was not, as is sometimes said, to purely and simply privatize Iraqi oil resources. That would be too difficult to carry off. Its objective was a privatization which would not openly speak its name, under the form of agreements allowing the US oil companies to "co-exploit" Iraqi oil along with the state company. But today the main concern of the US is knowing whether they can stay in the country and under what conditions.

What is the meaning of the Bush administration's "transfer of sovereignty" to Iraqis at the end of June?

It was last autumn that Bremer officially announced his project of so-called Iraqi government, comprising some people chosen by the occupier or by assemblies themselves designated by the occupier. What resulted was a showdown, with his main adversary being Grand Ayatollah Sistani, the highest Shiite dignitary in Iraq.

Grand Ayatollah Sistani is an utter reactionary on the social plane, a medievalist traditionalist. However, in this battle, he appeared as the one who challenged Bremer. An eminently reactionary man thus became the spokesperson of his community, and a majority of the Iraqi population, in opposition to the plans of the forces of occupation. Despite the important differences between Sistani and Khomeini, notably in their conception of relations between the political regime and the religious authorities, this situation is not totally dissimilar to the role that Khomeini played in Iran in the struggle against the Shah. Just as ultra-reactionary in terms of social matters or women's rights, Khomeini became the main figure of opposition to the Shah at the end of the 1970s, initially by taking up on his own account the theme of democracy.

When Bremer wished to force the hand of the Iraqis in November 2003, Sistani took up the challenge and called for demonstrations which took on a considerable size and obliged Bremer to draw back.

The Bush administration then again turned towards the UN to mediate and to save face. This mediation has ended up in the so-called promise to organize elections in January 2005. I say "so-called" because I do not believe that the US - in any case the Bush administration - is really disposed to organize free elections in Iraq.

In this context, nobody is fooled on the subject of the date of June 30. The Iraqi government installed will remain in fact designated by the occupying powers; even if the formation of this government is done through the UN it is the US which in the final analysis will install it. Moreover, this government will not be sovereign and it will have no control over the forces of occupation, nor even full budgetary control.

In reality the passage of power will not be between Bremer and the new Iraqi "government", but between Bremer and the new US ambassador in Baghdad, John Negroponte. Negroponte served in Vietnam and was implicated in some of the murkiest episodes of the US intervention in Central America in the 1980s. He is currently US ambassador to the UN, and in Baghdad he will head the biggest US embassy in the world, with more than 3,000 functionaries.

What kind of political and social realignments are underway in Iraq?

The landscape is hard to decipher, with the social and political forces in part allied, in part competing or opposed: those who participate in the Interim Governing Council put there by the US and those who aren't involved; those who are defined on religious or ethnic bases; the divisions inside the Shiite community; Baathist sectors reintegrated by the US army to control Falluja and so on.

The most important fracture is not between Shiites and Sunni, but between Arabs and Kurds.

Today the Kurds are the only part of the Iraqi population who approve of the occupation and who believe that it is in their interest to perpetuate it. It is true that Iraqi Kurdistan has benefited, since the end of the first Gulf War in 1991, from a real autonomy and a very privileged status in comparison with the rest of Iraq. It escaped the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. It was even able to prosper economically by serving as a lung for the rest of the country subjected to UN sanctions, which favoured the development of all kinds of trafficking. All this under the protection of the US and Britain.

For the rest, the political landscape is fractured. There is no hegemonic force, capable of governing the country.

So the perspectives for a certain form of democracy in Iraq are real, in my opinion, with the condition, of course, that the occupation is ended. I say that in the sense where, for example, one can say that Iran is today infinitely more "democratic" than the Saudi kingdom. In Iran, there are electoral contests, which are not a pure sham. There is a plurality of political forces, even if it is within certain well known limits. There is a genuinely conflicting Iranian political life, which has nothing to do with the totalitarian Islamic fundamentalism of the Saudi kingdom, nor the semi-fascist ex-dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.

The potential in Iraq for a certain democratic functioning is greater still than in Iran, for there is no hegemonic Iraqi political-clerical force. And among the people, the Shiite majority cohabits with a Sunni minority, not to mention other minorities, and of the rest, no community is homogeneous. All that contributes to the existence of objective conditions for a pluralist functioning, albeit within certain limits.

The US has, involuntarily, created the conditions for this possible democratization. Indeed, they believed that they would more easily control the country by destroying its state apparatus, that of Saddam Hussein. In the US, nearly everybody agrees today that the dissolution of the army and of every other public service, as well as the "de-Baathification" - which excluded tens of thousands of civil servants, most members of the party through strict opportunism and who are not easily replaceable - represented a monumental error. The US is thus deprived of the sole force which would have been capable of maintaining control of the population, a repressive and smoothly running state apparatus.

This has created a situation which will be hard to turn around. It's not easy to rebuild a state apparatus which has been dissolved for more than a year. We have seen in Falluja that the attempt to draft in a general of the former Republican Guard to stabilize the situation has led to an outcry such that the US army had to partially withdraw.

In this context, the sole possibility of recomposing an Iraqi state is to do it in a pluralist framework, at least initially.

The UN Security Council has finally unanimously adopted a resolution which ratifies US policy in Iraq. How do you explain what seems to be a retreat by the French, German, Russian and Chinese leaders? Has the Bush administration made concessions to reach this agreement?

Certainly the Bush team has made concessions. The fact in itself of having to go to the UN is an admission of

impotence and a “concession” on the part of an administration which, up until recently, had a much more arrogant attitude. Paris, Moscow and Peking are delighted to see the Security Council - where these three states each have a permanent seat and a right of veto - being again invested with official responsibility for the fate of Iraq. Still, nobody is fooled, and the fact that Paris and Berlin continue to refuse to participate in the occupation of the country, in the framework of NATO, indicates very well that the two capitals know that the real power there is still held exclusively by Washington. What they want is a genuine part in the running of Iraq, and thus a share of the spoils, the oil and reconstruction market. The official pretext is that the government which has been installed, despite the UN's approval, is not yet legitimate enough to authorize a foreign military presence. In other words, Paris, Berlin and Moscow are waiting for an elected government in Iraq, which in theory should take place at the beginning of next year. They hope also for a change of team in Washington with the arrival in power of Kerry who will be better disposed to involve them and turn the page on the deterioration of relations because of US “unilateralism”. Between one election and another, they expect that the situation will evolve in favour of their interests.

The new “Iraqi government” has announced the creation of an Iraqi armed force. Does this represent an “Iraqization” of the occupation, comparable to “Vietnamization” in the 1970s? Is it a belated attempt to involve elements of the old Saddamist state apparatus?

The attempt to set up an Iraqi armed force has been underway since the beginning of the occupation. Until now this has been a patent failure. A lot more is needed before “Iraqization” on the lines of “Vietnamization”, that is the replacement of US troops by those of a local puppet government, becomes possible; moreover don't forget that “Vietnamization” itself was only a prelude to the final debacle.

That said, in the framework of the general revision of Washington's action in Iraq, there has also been a change of henchman, with the crook Chalabi replaced by the brute Allawi, who “Le Monde” has rightly qualified as “Saddam without the moustache”. The latter emerged from the apparatus of the Baathist regime of which he was himself one of the barons. After having been deluded by the illusions of the “neocons”, the US is returning to reality. They can find nothing better to control Iraq than Saddam's apparatus. Except that they have discovered this too late, and what might have been a cynical but efficacious strategy now seems doomed to defeat.

What is the role of movements with a democratic and social dimension which are independent of the big religious or political forces?

Here there has been an enormous disappointment. One could be optimistic before the invasion. Iraq has historically had a massive Communist left, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s. Although crushed in Iraq by Saddam Hussein, it continued to represent in exile - where four million Iraqis lived before the war - a real force.

One might have expected that this tradition, which maintained roots in the country, would be reborn from the ashes. Instead, the Iraqi Communist Party, after having had a relatively correct attitude before the war - it was opposed to Saddam Hussein, which goes without saying, but also to the war which was being prepared and the project of US domination - agreed to participate in the IGC set up by the occupier. The CP has thus gone from participation in the Baathist government, in the early 1970s, to participation in a council of collaborators set up by the US occupation. That has very largely discredited this party and the Communist tradition.

There are other forces more to the left, but they do not have weight compared with what is at stake. As in Palestine and the whole region, the Islamic fundamentalists with the most radical discourse against Western domination have taken the lead and captured the popular resentment. From this viewpoint, the consequences of the attitude of the CP are very heavy.

The CP has joined the IGC. During the confrontations at Falluja the Worker Communist Party of Iraq (WCPI) equated the “two terrorisms”, namely the occupier and the militias of Moqtada Al Sadr. Is the Iraqi left condemned to a choice between these two options?

It is tragic that what is on offer on the left in Iraq today is essentially reduced to these two organizations - on the one hand, a party which acts as a “collaborator” with the US occupation in the worst Stalinist tradition; on the other hand, an ultra-left and ultra-sectarian organization, which can only find an echo among the sectors predisposed to understand its discourse of violent denunciation of “Arab nationalism” and of “political Islam”, that is to say among a small fraction of the Kurds (the WCPI emerged from the radicalization of a nationalist organization operating in Iranian Kurdistan). There is, of course, another road than alignment behind the Muslim fundamentalists or the Baathists and - what is, certainly, infinitely more serious - behind the occupier. It consists in “striking together but marching separately”, not in the sense of military action against the occupier - which is legitimate, however it amounts to a question of relations of force and strategic efficacy - but in the sense of a campaign of political agitation and of demonstrations against the occupation, considering the latter as the main enemy. It is an indispensable condition for carrying out the necessary ideological combat against the fundamentalists and nationalists.

Do the recent uprisings and assassinations of US citizens in Saudi Arabia, followed by an impressive deployment of the Saudi repressive forces, indicate the appearance in this country of an opposition? What are the political lines of divide in this country?

They indicate not only the “appearance” but the growth of a violent opposition to the reigning family and to its US sponsor. It is an old fact that the semi-totalitarian and Muslim fundamentalist character of the Saudi regime has prevented any progressive opposition from emerging in this country. Suddenly, the virulent resentment towards the regime and its masters has found as channel of expression another variant of Islamic fundamentalism. In this respect, from the insurrection in Mecca in 1979 to Osama bin Laden - since the deployment of US troops on the kingdom's soil in 1990 led the latter to turn against the house of Saud - this is a constant which has been established. The other potential oppositions - women, democrats and so on - are caught between these two poles. Unhappily the future of the region is everyday more sombre, and the modalities of US hegemony feed this terrible regression. The end of this hegemony appears as a necessary condition for the emergence of a new left opposition on a regional scale. In this sense, the setbacks for Washington are the only good news, all the more so in that they have a world importance and can only improve the conditions of progressive anti-imperialist combat in other regions of the planet.

Since the beginning of the second Intifada, in September 2000, Israeli repression against Palestinians has grown incessantly. The construction of the wall advances inexorably. The Bush administration has given a green light to the Sharon plan which closes the door to Palestinian refugees and involves the annexation of a significant part of the West Bank. The quartet (USA, UN, European Union and Russia) has backed up the US position. What is going on? Are we witnessing a new Nakba for the Palestinians?

The second Intifada has unhappily been an integral part of this regressive dynamic. It has been much less effective than the first in the struggle against Israeli occupation.

That stems from the fact that the Palestinians have in a way fallen into the trap of the militarization of the Intifada. I think that, in a fairly deliberate manner, the Israeli side has favoured this militarization of the confrontation. That allows recourse to heavy repression, under the pretext that it is no longer a matter of suppressing demonstrations, but of waging a war - the term is used endlessly on the Israeli side.

On the Palestinian side, this dynamic has brought a strong reduction in popular participation. The difference is striking between the mass character of the first Intifada and the second. The direct participation of women is an indication of this, it was remarkable in the first; it is completely absent from the second.

That corresponds perfectly to what was desired by someone like Ariel Sharon, who played a decisive role in the initial provocation in September 2000, and who was then able to use this situation to win the elections of February 2001. Since then, he has kept throwing oil on the flames, for it is from this fire that he draws his own strength.

Today, the situation of the Palestinians is worse than it has ever been in the entire history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There has never been such distress. This people is in the process of being completely strangled and a policy of rampant expulsion is de facto underway. The policy of the Israeli government created a really unbearable situation that forces a growing number of Palestinians into exile. Those who remain prisoners of this vice will then be concentrated in a few enclaves placed under high surveillance.

This dynamic favours the extremes on either side. Sharon benefits on the Israeli side. On the Palestinian side, it is Hamas which comes out on top, for this movement is the most violent of all in its opposition to the occupation and to Zionism. That worsens the historic impasse in which this part of the world finds itself.

In this context, what is the significance of the Geneva initiative?

The criticisms that can be made of this initiative from the viewpoint of Palestinian rights are obvious. But I would not polarize myself around this because, in the current situation, it is a stillborn initiative. Those who are behind this initiative, on the Israeli side and the Palestinian side, are completely marginalized.

If the political context should change so that the space for such initiatives opened up, I would adopt the same attitude that I took about the Oslo agreement in 1993. On the one hand, to explain that this in no way satisfies the fundamental rights of Palestinians, and therefore will not resolve the conflict. But on the other hand, it seems to me obvious that a return to a situation more or less similar to the period that followed the Oslo accords would be better than the current hell and asphyxia to which the Palestinians are condemned. In short, I would not support initiatives of this type, but neither will I support a policy of wishing for the worst. It will be necessary to continue the combat for the rights of the Palestinian people, starting from the meagre gains they have been able to acquire, rather than to reject those gains.

The Bush administration is confronted with great difficulties, on the ground and the diplomatic level, as illustrated by Spain's decision to withdraw from the occupying coalition. What types of responses are likely from the Bush administration and what debates will open up inside the US establishment, between Republicans and Democrats, on the occupation of Iraq and the future of the US imperial deployment?

The main difference on this front between Kerry and Bush resides in Kerry's greater willingness to share out the cake, with France and Russia in particular, so as to bring about a greater internationalization of the running of Iraq, via the UN. He thinks that that would allow him to defuse the violent opposition to the occupation of the country. That's what Kerry means when he says that he would be capable, unlike Bush, of rebuilding links with the allies.

The Bush administration persists for its part in wishing to modify the US presence without giving any ground on the control of Iraq. Taking account of the evolution of the situation, that seems to me virtually impossible.

But that does not mean that a solution à la Kerry has much more chance of squaring the circle either: to maintain US control over Iraq - including their military presence in the country - while pacifying it.

Indeed, if one enters into a process directly controlled by the UN Security Council, the pressure for free elections will be too strong to resist. And I don't see how the elections in Iraq could bring to power any government reconciled to

the presence of US troops.

That said, there are many imponderables. It's a very unstable region, where there can be very sudden changes. Nobody, for example, can bet on the survival of the Syrian or Iranian régimes. The situation is even becoming critical in the Saudi kingdom, until now relatively well preserved under an iron fist.

In reality, the policies practiced until now by the US in the Middle East, in what they have in common from one administration to the other, can only generate disorder and a form of descent into barbarism - I spoke after September 11 of the "clash of barbarisms".

On the one hand, the scandal of the tortures practiced by US soldiers in Iraq and in Afghanistan, the hundreds of prisoners deprived of all rights in Guantanamo, in violation of international agreements, illustrate the steps taken in this regressive spiral on the US side.

On the other, in the Middle East, all the popular heroes today are Muslim fundamentalists: Bin Laden, the leaders of Hamas, of Lebanon's Hezbollah, Moqtada Al-Sadr and so on. This is a measure of the regressive dynamic which weighs heavily on the region and which renders the situation particularly sombre.

But there are not also opposed tendencies?

In this worrying picture, there are happily some small rays of hope. The world movement against neoliberal globalization and against the war is beginning to have an impact, albeit very modest for the moment, in countries like Morocco, Egypt or Syria, inspired by what has happened in Europe. The first Moroccan social forum involved some hundreds of people in 2003 and there will be a second edition this summer. A small movement against globalization is starting to develop in Syria. These rays of hope are thus essentially due to exogenous factors; the endogenous factors rather tend to feed the radicalization on the ground of Islamic fundamentalism.

The new impact of the movement for global justice relates to important changes: information circulates infinitely more than in the past in the Middle East and the Arab world. The satellite TV chains in Arabic have broken the millstones imposed by the authoritarian regimes of the region, which cannot completely control access to the Internet either.

This new context can also favour the emergence of new left currents. To develop, the latter should privilege the areas where the fundamentalists are, by essence, incapable of competing: the social field, the rights of women, the denunciation of wildcat capitalism and its ravages on a planetary scale. Of course, any left worthy of the name must also oppose the occupation and the plans for Western domination; but here it must know how to beat the fundamentalists who largely occupy the scene.