

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article1379>



An Interview

On the Middle East

- IV Online magazine - 2007 - IV395 - December 2007 -

Publication date: Tuesday 4 December 2007

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

"Tehran doesn't need nuclear weapons to start exerting effective deterrence because they already have a powerful deterrent that is "conventional", aside from the fact that they have a network of allies in the area which they could also incite against the US and its own allies."

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/infiniteinjustice.jpg>]

State of Nature: Although 2007 proved to be the deadliest year for US in Iraq, the Bush administration is putting on an optimistic front with talk of casualty rates declining, al-Qaeda being routed from Baghdad, Sunni tribal leaders in Anbar and Diyala provinces cooperating with the US forces and so on, all primarily tied to the surge in troops. How do you assess the recent developments in Iraq?

Gilbert Achcar: Well, there's no point denying each and every statement that comes out from Washington. So yes, on the face of it, there has been a relative, but only relative, decline in casualties, at least in recorded casualties. Security controls in Baghdad seem to be working to a certain extent, but that's also because the so-called "surge" was concentrated in the capital and the "Mehdi Army" of Muqtada al-Sadr decided early on to withdraw from any points of possible confrontation with the US army, and so did Sunni insurgent groups. I tend to believe, therefore, that all this has had some effect, but it is purely temporary. There is no structural change, but only a result of the ongoing "surge", which cannot last forever. As with all such operations, people get used to them after a while and the relative decline in the number of casualties can quickly be reversed if the political conditions remain the same.

As for collaboration with the US occupation, there has been increasing friction between some of the tribal configurations in Arab Sunni areas of Iraq, on the one hand, and al-Qaeda, on the other. Coalitions were set up in some instances opposing or trying to get rid of al-Qaeda from their area, as part of collaboration between some tribal chiefs and occupation authorities or the Iraqi government. Tribalism has always been a tool of last resort for various proponents of modernisation in Iraq, who ended up making use of this most backward and traditionalist feature of Iraqi society. For example, although Saddam Hussein's regime displayed, on the face of it, a modernist nationalist ideology, Saddam very much exploited tribalism, especially in the last dozen years of his rule after the first US onslaught on Iraq. Before that, of course, colonialism also made quite extensive use of tribalism despite its "civilising" pretensions, and so did various republican leaders after the 1958 overthrow of the monarchy. And now, it is the US occupation that has been resorting to this same mechanism of buying tribal leaders with big amounts of money and other privileges.

But all this is very unstable, very fragile. The fact is that, whatever relative decline there is in the level of violence in Iraq, there is no political breakthrough for the United States in the sense that it is not really able to control the country. That's absolutely clear. Probably one of the best illustrations of that is provided by the country's political institutions. Although these were built under US patronage, the US can't have, for instance, the oil law ratified by the Parliament, as there is a majority there that is opposed to the draft law that Washington wishes to push through. This tells us a lot about the lack of real control by the United States over Iraq. And this is a major failure, mind you, because the oil law is one of the key "benchmarks" that the US administration has set for the assessment of the whole Iraqi situation when it launched the "surge".

The failure is blatant. There are lots of contradictions at the governmental level between the various forces that were willing to operate within the institutional framework. To these serious problems, we should add the prospective tension over Kirkuk between the Kurds and the rest, which has not yet come completely to the fore until now. By the rest, I mean not only the other Iraqi communities, the Arab majority and the Turkmen minority, but also the Turks. Turkey itself has been escalating its threats of a military intervention in Northern Iraq, officially because of the PKK, but actually in a context where the issue of Kirkuk was supposed to be settled by a referendum originally planned for

November of this year, and then postponed. This is an issue on which the Turkish government has been very nervous. They would not accept Kirkuk to be turned over to the Kurdish de facto autonomous state, and would prevent such an outcome by any means necessary. This is a further problem for the United States because it involves a possible clash between two regional allies – the Iraqi Kurdish alliance and the Turkish military. If you put everything we've mentioned in the picture, the failure is absolutely dismal. And it's not only a failure in Iraq – the whole Middle East policy of the US administration is a disaster, actually.

This is even more apparent if you take the "Greater Middle East", as they call it. Just look at Afghanistan, where the comeback of the Taliban is impressive. And Pakistan is now in a state verging on chaos – a source of anxiety for the United States, because Pakistan is not only a key ally of Washington, but also a nuclear state. Of course, if chaos prevails in Pakistan ultimately, you can imagine what sort of consequences this would have for Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. Tehran very clearly shows that it knows well that the US is bogged down with all these problems and therefore it doesn't take US threats very seriously, or at least it shows that it is not deterred by such threats.

There we see the problem of the so-called credibility of US power, which has been very much affected by the disastrous balance sheet of the Bush administration. This administration has dilapidated most of the capital that the United States got out from the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The paralysis and then collapse of the Soviet Union coincided with the first war against Iraq as a spectacular demonstration of US tremendous firepower and military gadgetry built up during the Reagan years. The overall image resulting from that was then one of a United States more powerful than ever and ahead of the rest of the world by a longer distance than at any previous point since the middle of last century, when the Soviet Union got the nuclear weapon. George W. Bush inherited not only this military supremacy, increased and enhanced throughout the years after the fall of the Soviet Union, but also a country experiencing the longest period of economic expansion in its history.

So there were a lot of ingredients comforting US supremacy. This administration got the responsibility for managing this huge capital and then achieved the great feat of turning the US Empire's accounts into the red. This is really an achievement! The Bush administration will certainly go down in history not only as the most reactionary the United States has ever seen – they broke this record already from the start – but also as the most disastrous ever for the US imperial project. That's absolutely clear, I believe.

SoN: You mentioned Moqtada al-Sadr and the Mehdi Army withdrawing in order to avoid a confrontation with the US. Sadr ordered a six month suspension of the Mehdi Army's operations in August to "rehabilitate [the army] in a way that will safeguard its ideological image." The order followed two days of clashes between rival Shia factions in Kerbala, which killed over 50 people and forced hundreds of thousands of pilgrims to flee the holy city. What does Sadr mean by "rehabilitation"? Can he retain control over the whole army? What are his long term objectives?

GA: It is very difficult for him to exert control because, from the start, the Mehdi Army was a ragtag assembly of people, and Sadr is a very young person who only emerged after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime and had no organisation or network of officers on which he could rely. His clout attracted a lot of people of various kinds. Some probably were believers in his credentials, more likely to be followers of his family, or his father, than of himself and his "charisma", which is usually only a matter of expectations (you know the sociological accounts of the so-called "charisma" as more a product of expectations than of any inherent feature of the "charismatic" person). Sadr also attracted a lot of people who wanted to exploit that clout opportunistically, knowing that there wouldn't be any major constraints on their behaviour, because Sadr's organisation has a very weak structure. And, indeed, that's his problem. Compare the Mehdi Army with the Badr organisation of al-Hakim, of the previously called SCIRI: these are people who had years to build up their organisation, with logistical help and military training provided by Iran. They already had a militarised structure before 2003 and are therefore much more organised and centralised than whatever Sadr's movement is or could become in the foreseeable future. I can't really see how under present conditions he would be able to organise something that would really be under his firm control. So, yes, I think the feasibility of that project is quite limited.

SoN: The US has unilaterally imposed economic sanctions on Iran, the harshest since the 1979 revolution and the US embassy crisis. It appears that European governments, particularly Britain, France and Germany are supporting the US campaign. Multinational companies outside the US are facing threats from Washington that they risk jeopardising their US interests if they continue doing business with Tehran. How likely is it that the economic pressure on Iran will be followed by military action?

GA: Let's try to look at it, first of all, from the point of view of Iran. How would Iran perceive what is going on? They know the United States is bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, and US forces are already facing a situation of overstretch regarding their human resources. It's not a problem of military technology or hardware; the Pentagon's are absolutely huge. Their problem is the human factor, where they have a real shortage of troops. This is a point that I am keen on stressing: the real Achilles' heel of the US is the US population! And the so-called Vietnam Syndrome is still there, despite everything that has been said to the contrary. It had receded for a while after 9/11, under the impact of the attacks, but then it came back with a vengeance when people discovered that Iraq was turning sour and that they had been lied to. When you compare the United States of today with that of the Vietnam era in terms of military power, it is much more powerful today than at the time of Vietnam in all respects – except one: the number of troops. At the time of Vietnam they had the draft, plus a much larger professional army. After Vietnam, they had to abolish the draft, of course, and it would be very difficult politically for any administration to re-establish it, especially with Iraq in the background. The Pentagon has not been successful in its recruitment campaigns, and the number of troops is very much below what they would need ideally, in light of their experience in Iraq, to sustain the kind of renewed interventionist frenzy and expansion of military control that this administration tried to set up.

The Iranians see all that, and they know therefore that, to start with, it's out of the question that a ground invasion is launched against Iran. They know also that the Pentagon brass, the uniformed military in the United States, are hostile to the very idea of a major operation against Iran, given the conditions. So the worst that they could see coming would be some missile strikes from afar on some of their nuclear locations. But they built those already taking into consideration the possibility of such threats, and it wouldn't be easy for the US, therefore, to secure any meaningful result out of such strikes. And finally, the rulers of Iran know that the US knows that they can retaliate, that they have various ways of retaliating and various targets. To be sure, the US territory proper is not one of them because Iran doesn't have the vectors to reach it and the Iranian regime is not suicidal, even though it sponsors suicide attacks. But there are US troops in the Gulf, mainly in Iraq, who could be targeted and Israel also could be a target. Moreover, as the Saudi foreign minister himself said in a recent interview, the Saudi kingdom would make an excellent target – probably the most effective one, because strikes on the kingdom would have a tremendous disruptive effect on world economy. I mean if the oil production or exporting facilities of the kingdom are successfully targeted, you can easily imagine the huge economic impact it would have.

Iran's rulers have all these means of retaliation and deterrence, and in a sense they don't really need nuclear weapons. I am not saying that they are not interested in getting nuclear weapons; such weapons could actually enhance their deterrent power tremendously. However, Ahmadinejad keeps repeating that they are not interested: he even says that the nuclear weapon is not Islamic, and so on. Anyway, I'm not interested in getting into a guessing game about Iranian intentions. The fact is that Tehran doesn't need nuclear weapons to start exerting effective deterrence because they already have a powerful deterrent that is "conventional", aside from the fact that they have a network of allies in the area which they could also incite against the US and its own allies. So this is how they see things in Tehran, I believe, and that's why they feel secure. They are just not intimidated by the gesticulations of the US and its allies.

Now, looking at things from the perspective as seen from Washington, I would say first of all that the Bush administration is very much aware of the factors I mentioned. Besides, this President is politically a lame duck: he has lost Congress and his approval rate in the polls is appallingly low, and so is his overall credibility. So although there has been some kind of bipartisan convergence in the US establishment against Iran, in favour of increased sanctions, there certainly is no consensus yet for any kind of military action.

So if we take all that into consideration, I think that the likelihood of a military strike against Iran is quite low. It's quite low at least in rational terms. Now this is an administration which has proved that it doesn't fully abide by rationality, to say the least. So, would they go for some new crazy, adventurist operation? Well, once again with a reluctant or either hostile Pentagon, this is difficult to conceive. Those who are most interested in a military strike against Iran are in fact the Israeli establishment. They feel that this US administration owes them that because they asked for it before the invasion of Iraq as they considered Iran to be the real priority, and they were told by the Bush administration that Iran's turn would come next. They feel now that this administration will soon leave the scene with such a catastrophic balance sheet that the "Vietnam Syndrome" could be largely renewed: the ability of any future US administration of getting involved in major military operations might well be quite limited again, as it was during the Reagan years. That's why the Israelis would like this administration, since it's here for its last year now, to deliver on its promise before it leaves. It is even possible that Israel would take the initiative, after some secret understanding with the Bush administration, or parts of it at the very least. But then the technicalities of this scenario are also a problem, because to get to Iran by air would entail a lot of risks for Israel unless they got a green light from countries like Turkey, Jordan or the Saudi Kingdom. And, of course, since the US controls the skies over Iraq, if Israel took this route, that would very obviously be proof of US direct collusion. Israel could also resort to missile strikes, in order to ignite the whole situation. But I am not sure that they have the means to achieve any meaningful result at that level, and if they only set the area ablaze without achieving any significant military impact over targets in Iran, what would they have accomplished? They would have only enhanced the Iranians' inclination to get nuclear weaponry as they could see in Israel's aggression a forerunner of a possible future nuclear strike.

SoN: The Bush administration has designated the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's Quds Force as a supporter of terrorism, which is the first time a sovereign state's military is labelled a terrorist entity. What is the extent of the Quds Force's involvement in the Middle East?

GA: There has not been any open direct involvement out of Iran in the last few years. But Tehran, of course, is actively intervening in covert ways in countries like Iraq and Lebanon, where it has powerful allies which it can access easily, unlike the 1967 Occupied Territories in Palestine where they also have allies, like Hamas, but where the possibility of interaction is very limited. At any rate, we know well that Washington's designation of who is a "terrorist" and who is not is just political manoeuvring. It is part of the same pressure as economic sanctions and military gesticulations. It's not that they suddenly discovered in Washington something new about the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. This is just part of their overall offensive.

SoN: How significant is the transnational Shiite community for the regional aspirations of Iran?

GA: Iran uses different cards which it wishes to be able to play simultaneously. Regionally speaking, on the one hand, the Shiite factor is important, as it is the most "natural" network for the expansion of Iranian influence for obvious reasons. But then there is also the pan-Islamic factor and Iran is very keen on countering all attempts at isolating it as a Shiite power by fostering anti-Shiite sectarian feelings among the Sunnis, who are, of course, the vast majority of Muslims. Therefore, an important part of Iran's strategy has been to secure some key alliances among Sunnis, and that's why the one they established with Hamas is very important in their eyes. This is not, or not only, because of the objective importance of Hamas in terms of actual power on the ground, but because of the symbolic importance of Hamas as the most prestigious Sunni Islamic fundamentalist anti-Western, anti-Israeli force, aside from al-Qaeda – or so it used to be. And, unlike al-Qaeda, Hamas has some real legitimacy because of its mass base, which is why it bears a tremendous symbolic importance for Iran. So does the issue of Palestine as a whole: I have explained repeatedly that Ahmadinejad's rant about Israel is not a sign of mental disorder but actually, to a certain extent, a well-designed way of setting Iran as the most radical anti-Israeli Islamic state, thereby outbidding all the rest and appealing to the entire Sunni popular constituency in the Arab world, striking a positive chord with movements like the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

Iran uses the Shiite card as a tool to expand its influence, but it is careful not to play it openly in a sectarian way as a

counterforce to Sunnis. In that regard, there is a clear difference between the Iranian discourse, emphasising Islamic unity, and the ultra-sectarian Wahhabi discourse originating in the Saudi kingdom. To be sure, Wahhabis have always been very much anti-Shiite sectarians ideologically, but politically too, the Saudi and Jordanian monarchies are whipping up Sunni sectarian feelings against Iran because this is the only ideological weapon available to them in order to counter what Tehran is doing, since they can certainly not outbid Iran in anti-Western anti-Israeli statements due to their close links to the United States. They are trying to throw oil on the fire of sectarian tensions everywhere. The most recent major case is Lebanon, where there was no history of Shiite-Sunni friction, but in the last couple of years this has emerged prominently as a real danger and it is increasingly so very worryingly, fanned by depictions of Hezbollah as a mere Iranian puppet in order to discredit it.

SoN: The possibility of a cross border offensive into northern Iraq by Turkey appears to have rattled the White House. Bush has reiterated to Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan that the US regards the PKK as a terrorist organisation and has pledged to share intelligence in a bid to head off any significant Turkish military operation in Iraq. Will that prove satisfactory to the Turks? Will Erdogan be able to resist the pressure from within Turkey for a military operation?

GA: As I said a little while ago, I think that the PKK is just the official part of the story. I believe that this whole recent gesticulation by the Turkish military was mostly motivated by the issue of Kirkuk, knowing that the deadline for a settlement of the dispute over the town by way of a referendum is coming quite close. And I think that the Turkish military – I say the Turkish military because they are the holders of decisive power in Turkey, not Prime Minister Erdogan – are very much worried about Kirkuk. The reason is that they very much dislike already the de facto autonomous quasi-state that exists in the Iraqi part of Kurdistan. They know that, if the Kurdish alliance gets hold of Kirkuk and controls therefore this piece of the oil cake, it would give it greatly enhanced means and this would just consolidate and perpetuate the autonomous state in Kurdistan. This would be a source of inspiration for the major part of Kurdistan that is under Turkish control. This is why the Turkish military want to prevent the Kurds from getting Kirkuk. They argue that there is an important Turkmen community in Kirkuk, which was considered to be the largest community in the city some decades ago, claiming to speak on behalf of these people with whom Turks have ethnic and cultural affinities, rather than admitting that they are acting for their own agenda.

I don't think, therefore, that US assurances about the PKK would solve the problem and defuse the tension decisively. What I don't know however – since I suppose that this has also been part of the discussion – is what kind of promises the Bush administration has made to the Turkish authorities on the issue of the future of Kirkuk. This is a big problem for the US because it might very well be the cause of a war, which might take larger proportions than any internal violence that has occurred until now in Iraq, since the Iraqi Kurds possess a real army, unlike the various Arab Iraqi fractions, and Turkey itself would interfere. This could have far-reaching consequences for the situation in the region.

SoN: While the PKK is listed as a terrorist organisation by the US, the PJAK (Kurdistan Free Life Party), which appears to be tightly linked to the PKK is said to be receiving direct and indirect aid by the US to wage a similar battle on the Iraqi border with Iran. The PJAK leader Rahman Haj Ahmadi was recently welcomed in Washington and Iran remains convinced that the US is using the PJAK in a proxy war. What do you think is the US Kurdish strategy?

GA: I really doubt that they have any coherent strategy with a long-term perspective on this issue. I think that they are just navigating by sight and nothing more. In the first place, I very much doubt that they could devise any kind of coherent policy for such a complex situation with so many almost irreconcilable contradictions. They have to live with that and try to prevent the situation from exploding. But will they be able to avoid an explosion? It remains to be seen.

SoN: Alain Gresh of Le Monde Diplomatique describes Lebanon as “a fragile entity that depends upon a subtle sectarian alchemy.” To what extent do you think the political chaos over the presidential election, the huge amount of

weapons entering the country and the ever deepening sectarian divisions signal that Lebanon as “a fragile entity” has been tested to the limit and is on the verge of another civil war?

GA: It is clear that Lebanon, one more time in its recent history, is presently standing on a major crossroads because of the fight over the presidency. Since the 24th of November, the country is without a president. Until now the parliamentary majority, which is the coalition of forces backed by the United States and its regional allies, and the opposition, which is the coalition of forces including Hezbollah and backed by Syria and Iran, have not been able to reach a compromise. They have been therefore postponing the meeting of the Parliament dedicated to the election of the new president. (In Lebanon, although the President of the Republic is elected by the Parliament, he used to have very extensive powers – a peculiar combination of features pertaining to a presidential regime with features belonging to a parliamentary one. Presidential prerogatives were however reduced at the end of the fifteen year civil war in 1989-90.) No compromise has been reached to this day between the majority and the opposition, and – more importantly – between the key regional and international players standing behind them and meddling in Lebanon’s affairs: Washington, Paris, Damascus, Tehran and the Saudis.

If they never reach a compromise and don’t manage to get a consensual president elected, there are several possible scenarios which would all amount to an institutional split and would very likely lead to a sharp increase in sectarian and political tensions, possibly even ignite a new civil war. A civil war this time would oppose Shiites and Sunnis, whereas this was not at all a feature of the fifteen-year war. It would also set the two camps within the Maronite Christian community against each other: in itself, this is not new as there were already several clashes during the fifteen-year war between Maronite factions. A new civil war could even be bloodier and more destructive than the one that ended in 1990, given that Sunnis and Shiites are much more intermingled than Christian and Muslims were prior to 1975, when the previous civil war started.

That’s a really terrifying perspective, and one can only hope that reason prevails – for there is a matter of sheer reason involved. I mean that both camps should realise that they have nothing to gain from a conflagration: it would be absolutely devastating for everybody – above all for ordinary people, of course. I do hope that some kind of compromise will prevail and that the worst-case scenario will be avoided.

*SoN: You mentioned the classic accusation against Hezbollah that it is effectively an Iranian proxy. Yet in your book *The 33-Day War*, you assert that although Iran remains “the supreme reference” for the party, Hezbollah is still not “simply an outlet of the Iranian regime, under direct control from Tehran.” How does Hezbollah differ from the Iranian model? To what extent can it in fact be considered an autonomous political organisation?*

GA: Well, it differs from the Iranian model in the sense that it’s not a state. Although it controls some areas, it doesn’t govern, so it’s difficult to compare them in that sense.

SoN: But in terms of ideology.

GA: In terms of ideology, Hezbollah abides in principle by all the key tenets of the ruling ideology in Iran, including allegiance to the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran. But despite this ideological allegiance, Hezbollah declared from the time it was officially born – in the name of Lebanon’s specificity as a multi-religious multi-sectarian country and with acquiescence from Iran – that the Iranian model of the Islamic Republic cannot be implemented in Lebanon. They stated at the time of their official proclamation that, in order to be able to implement their ideal model, they would need to get the Christians to convert to Islam, which was tantamount to pushing their doctrinal agenda into the realm of pure fantasy. As a result of that, the Iranian model has the status of a Utopia for Hezbollah, while in reality they act within the sectarian political framework in Lebanon in order to maximise gains for themselves and the Shiite community. Hezbollah cannot contemplate controlling the state, but they certainly strive to exert control over their own community, as every other sectarian force in Lebanon does. More precisely, they exert control over their

community along with their competitor and current ally Amal, the other Lebanese Shiite movement. They are happy with the existing situation whereby each community applies its own religious rules for issues like women's status, marriage, inheritance, etc., while political power and state functions are shared among political forces representing the various sectarian communities.

Hezbollah's main concern, presently, is defensive, because they know that they are targeted by Israel and the United States and that Washington wants them to disarm. They wouldn't accept because they know that, if they disarmed, either they would have to relinquish their political profile, which was built on their resistance struggle against Israel's occupation and their opposition to Western domination, or they would make it easier to crush them. That's why they wouldn't surrender their arms unless major guarantees were given to them. This is at least what they say, but the political changes necessary for such guarantees would have to be of such a profound character that they are very unlikely in the foreseeable future. This means that Hezbollah will stick to their arms for still a long time to come, unless both Damascus and Tehran advise them to the contrary, which would leave them then with little choice but to abide.

Update question on 2nd December 2007

SoN: The Lebanese government has nominated the commander of the armed forces, General Michel Suleiman, as a compromise president. Is this likely to go ahead and, if so, is it likely to be a suitable solution?

GA: As things appear at the moment, Suleiman's election is very likely. Funnily, every protagonist has claimed him as their candidate: Hariri made the proposal in the name of the governmental and parliamentary majority, after consulting with his key allies; the opposition waited for their fellow, General Aoun, to react as he had claimed the post for himself; the latter said that he had been the first to propose Suleiman as a compromise president and therefore approved the deal; then Hezbollah officially announced, today, their own approval and their 'respect' for the general. The only dissensions are minor ones within the Hariri camp, and this fact points to a reality that Hariri and his media are desperately trying to blur. Suleiman is actually Syria's preferred candidate; the previous president, Emile Lahoud, closely linked to Damascus, had considered handing power to Suleiman, but was deterred from doing so by the Hariri majority.

It is no secret in Beirut that Suleiman's designation is a result of what Hariri's ally and (presently) anti-Syrian leader Walid Jumblatt himself has called an 'American-Syrian bazaar'. He was referring to the deal that Washington did cut with Damascus to get Syria to join the Middle East conference recently at Annapolis. The truth is indeed that Suleiman is above all the object of a compromise between the US and Syria – in the well-known tradition of Lebanese politics whereby the real makers of presidents are foreign powers. There is some parallel between Suleiman and General Fouad Chehab, who was elected president in 1958 after having kept the army neutral in the civil strife that occurred in that year, which led to the landing of US Marines in Lebanon. Chehab was a candidate of compromise between Washington and Cairo. He ruled the country making an intrusive use of military intelligence, but also in what was certainly Lebanon's most 'enlightened' reformist presidency to this day.

Whatever Suleiman's ambition to imitate Chehab could be, he won't be able to deliver unless the US-Syrian concord goes far beyond a compromise president to a fundamental agreement that would represent a major shift in regional politics. Even in such a case, Suleiman would still face a Hezbollah that is actually stronger than the official Lebanese armed forces and able to split them on sectarian lines in case of confrontation. The difference with 1958, when the army led by Chehab was indisputably the major force in the country, is obvious. In other words, not only is a more substantial bargain between Damascus and Washington necessary for Suleiman to establish a stable regime, but also Tehran's own acquiescence to the deal as a prerequisite for Hezbollah's acceptance of disarming. We are still far from such a perspective as the US and Israel are basically trying to split Syria away from Iran.

Cihan Aksan & Jon Bailes interviewed Gilbert Achcar for StateOfNature.org, with whose kind permission it appears here.