



## ***Washington's Wars and Occupations*** **Month in Review #59**

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### **CHANGE HAPPENS SLOWLY, EXCEPT WHEN IT HAPPENS FAST**

"Change happens slowly," Tom Hayden wrote a few months ago, "except when it happens fast." That's an important insight to keep in mind when looking at the wars and occupations that afflict the Middle East right now.

On the surface, from one month to the next there seems to be little or no change. U.S. military operations, political bullying and backing for Israeli colonialism grind on. Iraqis, Afghans, Palestinians, Pakistanis and Americans – among others – continue to die in Washington's illegal, immoral wars.

Yet every week events take place that indicate the potential for big changes ahead. These reflect one underlying fact: The offensive George Bush launched nine years ago aimed at attaining a qualitatively new level of U.S. domination via military force did not succeed. The consequences of this failure are still playing out to Washington's disadvantage.

So the U.S. is now engaged in what is simultaneously a delicate (in geo-strategic terms) and brutal (in human terms) salvage operation. The goal is to "stabilize" the region in a way that maintains maximum U.S. clout but does not lock Washington into impossible quests which drain U.S. military, political and financial strength and undermine already-declining U.S. global hegemony.

Washington's dilemma was captured by one insightful mainstream commentator, *The Atlantic's* Jeffrey Goldberg: "The U.S. is maxed out on risk."

What is that risk? That the peoples of the region who are the object of Washington's stabilization schemes might attain enough strength to wrest developments out of Washington's control. That the current project of a modest retrenchment will fail just as George Bush's earlier all-force, all-torture, all-regime-change adventure did.

No one can say what chain reaction might turn such risks into immediate practical possibilities. But two things can be predicted with relative confidence.

First, only retreats much further than Washington is now willing to consider can prevent a crisis from occurring in Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel-Palestine or in regard to Iran – a crisis that will leave the U.S. only the options of major military re-escalation or even bigger retreat.

Second, a decisive factor in forcing the U.S. to retreat at such a moment of crisis – or better yet pushing Washington back before one arrives – will be the strength of antiwar public opinion and the self-conscious antiwar movement.

### **AFGHANISTAN: A CHANGE MAY COME**

A story in *The New York Times* March 26 was unusually blunt:

American and NATO troops firing from passing convoys and military checkpoints have killed 30 Afghans and wounded 80 others since last summer, but in no instance did the victims prove to be a danger to troops... The persistence of deadly shootings has led to growing resentment among Afghans angry at what they see as impunity with which the troops operate, a friction that has turned villages firmly against the occupation... 'The people are tired of all these cruel actions by the foreigners.' said Naqibullah Samim, a village elder. 'The people do not have any other choice; they will rise against the government and fight them and the foreigners.'

Such reports on the reality of the Afghan war are usually hidden from the U.S. public. But everyone in or near Afghanistan knows what's up – and that it means the U.S. has no chance of "winning" the war. Even most of the military brass and their superiors in the administration (but not their Neocon critics) have gotten the message. That's why talk of "victory" has all but disappeared from official press conferences, replaced by phrases about "weakening the Taliban," negotiating to achieve "national reconciliation," even admission that there can be no military solution, only a political one, to the Afghan conflict.

And on the decisive political front, there are significant developments.

In what *Nation* columnist Robert Dreyfus calls "the most important peace initiative since the start of the war," Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Islamic Party, a key ally of the Taliban, sent a peace delegation to Kabul for meetings with the Afghan government last month. Hekmatyar's proposed "National Rescue Agreement" calls for the withdrawal of all foreign troops – the bottom line for every force in the insurgency – but was also accompanied by flexibility about the exact withdrawal date and acceptance of the current regime as at least an interim governmental authority.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai welcomed the delegation and announced plans to convene an Afghanistan-wide council to discuss reconciliation with the Taliban, the Islamic Party, and anyone else who wants to take part. Karzai's peace-via-negotiations initiative has been strongly encouraged by Britain and other European countries, where public opinion has turned decisively against the Afghan war.

Add to this the shifting stance of the government of Pakistan, which because of its size, location, ties to the Taliban, and indispensable role in U.S. operations plays a key role in every aspect of the Afghan war. Recent reports indicate that key Pakistani leaders have concluded that serious moves toward a peace agreement by Washington, the Karzai regime, and the Taliban are truly on the horizon. An in-depth Washington Post story March 24 quotes a former Pakistani Foreign Secretary as declaring, "There is a sort of panic in Pakistan that the endgame may be earlier than Pakistan had thought."

All this has led many observers to conclude that current U.S. strategy – from its military offensives to new efforts to limit civilian casualties – is aimed at developing a "position of strength" for looming negotiations. And that it is aimed at least as much at convincing the U.S. public that "we have them on the run" so that any negotiated settlement can be sold as a U.S. success, thus blunting the inevitable barrage of attacks that will be launched against any

President who “gives an inch to terrorists” (but especially against a Black man who is already being demonized by the far right).

Based on such reasoning, *Nation* columnist Robert Dreyfus went out on a huge limb March 24: “I make a bold prediction: the war in Afghanistan will be pretty much over by July, 2011... the end will be messy, a lot of loose ends will be left over, and it will be unsatisfying to all sides...” For the full text, go to: [www.thenation.com/blogs/dreyfuss/544779](http://www.thenation.com/blogs/dreyfuss/544779).

That kind of prediction needs to be taken with a huge grain of salt. But Dreyfus is not wrong to highlight the factors indicating such an outcome is a real possibility. In fact it is important to keep this viewpoint in front of an antiwar movement which has an absolutely crucial role to play in making sure that, as imperial policy-makers calculate and recalculate the domestic factors in “stay vs. get out,” the balance tilts in favor of “get out.”

### **ISRAEL-PALESTINE: PETRAEUS SHAKES THINGS UP**

In the Israel-Palestine conflict, there is no change in Israeli policies of repression and settlement building. If anything they are accelerating in East Jerusalem. And despite the sharp public disagreements between Washington and Tel Aviv, not a single dime has been cut from the \$3 billion-plus a year the U.S. gives Israel in economic and military aid.

But underneath, the ground is shifting. The most telling indication came in recent congressional testimony by top U.S. military leader (and, up until these remarks, Neocon darling) General David Petraeus. Included in Petraeus’s description of threats to U.S. operations in the Middle East was the following:

The enduring hostilities between Israel and some of its neighbors present distinct challenges to our ability to advance our interests in the AOR [CentCom Area of Responsibility]. Israeli-Palestinian tensions often flare into violence and large-scale armed confrontations. The conflict foments anti-American sentiment, due to a perception of U.S. favoritism for Israel. Arab anger over the Palestinian question limits the strength and depth of U.S. partnerships with governments and peoples in the region and weakens the legitimacy of moderate regimes in the Arab world. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda and other militant groups exploit that anger to mobilize support.

Despite its careful phrasing, Petraeus’s bottom-line message was lost on no one: Israel’s policies are jeopardizing U.S. interests, even the lives of troops under his command. The message got driven home further when it was reported that Petraeus had forcefully made the same point in a special January briefing for the Joints Chiefs of Staff.

Reactions to Petraeus’s remarks confirmed their significance. Jeffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic* elaborated: “The U.S., given its overwhelming challenges, is neither interested in Israel’s desire to reshape its region, nor can it tolerate any more risk deriving from Israel’s actions. However small the risks might be, the U.S. is maxed out on risk. Therefore, Israel’s interests and that of the U.S. diverge.” *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman – whose blowhard columns are always a good indication of which way the winds are blowing in Non-Neocon elite circles – referenced Petraeus in his March 28 column, where he wrote that “a tectonic shift has taken place beneath the surface of Israel-U.S. relations.”

For his part, Abe Foxman, head of the B’nai B’rith Anti-Defamation League, immediately proclaimed that Petraeus’s remarks “smacked of blaming the Jews for everything” – thus confirming what a threat they are to Israel’s die-hard defenders.

If geo-political considerations were all that mattered, Washington would already have muscled Israel into a different stance. But on anything concerning Israel, domestic politics – in particular the clout of the Israel Lobby and the way that “support for Israel” has become a sacred cow in mainstream politics – play a disproportionate role. Next to the battle on the ground in occupied Palestine, the fight over U.S. public opinion and policy is the most important front in the global struggle for Palestinian human and national rights.

This puts great challenges before U.S. activists to take maximum advantage of today’s shifting terrain. There are opportunities on many levels. The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) effort, the fullest expression of Palestine solidarity, is making substantial headway in Europe and achieved a breakthrough here with a pro-divestment vote by the UC Berkeley Student Government last month. Many figures and groups are not yet ready to embrace BDS, but can be moved to call for cuts in U.S. military aid to Tel Aviv and other material steps to put pressure on Israel.

### **NO GOOD OPTIONS FOR WASHINGTON IN IRAQ, IRAN AND BEYOND**

Just how much Washington is “maxed out on risk” is underscored by looking beyond Afghanistan and Israel-Palestine.

A lot of words have been spilled in the U.S. media about the Iraqi elections, most of them missing the point. The essential thing is that Iraqi politics are steadily moving beyond U.S. control, that Iran’s influence in Baghdad is increasingly greater than Washington’s, and that pressure from Iraqis for U.S. complete withdrawal – most sharply indicated by the strong showing of the Sadristis – is only going to increase. (The best single source for the details of all this is [www.juancole.com](http://www.juancole.com).) Though the U.S. media keeps writing that “the U.S. may have to stay in Iraq after the 2011 deadline” the fact is the push from Iraqis themselves is going to go in the opposite direction. Whatever the desires of many in the Obama administration and those who assault it from the right, Washington is going to face a huge crisis on the ground if it tries to maintain a permanent occupation.

Washington also has no good options in its standoff with Iran. Military action by the U.S. or Israel is not just “more risk” but the ultimate in risk, all but certain to backfire. And for Washington to convince China and Russia to go along with sanctions that could really force a change in Tehran’s behavior would require far bigger concessions to those two countries than U.S. leaders are now willing to contemplate. So the U.S. is stuck with limited options: continued impasse; military steps that involve huge risks; or negotiations that respect Iran’s sovereignty and right to peaceful use of nuclear power. It is probably too much to think this administration will quickly engage in the latter. But as long as the worst fear-mongers don’t attain more political clout, we have good prospects of holding the worst options at bay and eventually compelling some kind of compromise.

None of these dilemmas can be separated from the changes that are eroding U.S. power globally.

Hardly a day goes by without a report of China doing something on the world stage that reflects its growing economic might, whether it is taking the lead in some new energy technology or rejecting a U.S. demand regarding its currency.

Meanwhile Latin America, as Mark Weisbrot put it (*Guardian*, Feb. 25), “once under the control of the U.S. is increasingly emerging as a power bloc with its own interests and agenda. In February 32 Latin American and Caribbean countries created a new regional organization that

excluded Canada and the U.S. The increasing independence of Latin America has been one of the most important geopolitical changes over the last decade..."

And Washington's #1 military alliance, NATO, is in trouble. Opposition to U.S. wars in Iraq and now Afghanistan has spread to the point where U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates says the alliance faces a "crisis." Gates is worried because, in his words, "The demilitarization of Europe – where large swaths of the general public and political class are averse to military force and the risks that go with it – has gone from a blessing in the 20th century to an impediment to achieving real security and lasting peace in the 21st."

Finally there is U.S. financial overstretch. Speculation has even begun to creep into the mainstream press that the U.S. simply cannot afford to keep waging the kind of wars it is immersed in today. For an excellent and detailed assessment of the costs, see "A Titanic Budget in an Ocean of Icebergs" by Jo Comerford of the National Priorities Project at:

<http://brechtforum.org/titanic-budget-ocean-icebergs>.

### **DOMESTIC POLITICS ABSOLUTELY CRUCIAL**

The upshot of all this is that conditions across the globe indicate substantial potential to push the U.S. empire back. Anti-imperial victories will not take the form of U.S. troops fleeing a liberation army as they did in Saigon in 1975. But they will be victories nonetheless. The weak link in achieving them lies in U.S. domestic politics.

The U.S. majority has become disillusioned with Washington's current Middle East wars, and is far more concerned with solving pressing domestic problems. But peace activists have not yet found the ways to translate this sentiment into a strong, ever-growing pole in national politics. On that terrain, the biggest pressure right now is coming from the overlapping forces of the fear-mongering right, the still crusading Neocons and the Israel Lobby. Conditions exist to change that equation, but it will require a lot of work.

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