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Iraq

# The Iraqi Debacle

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# Iraqi dynamics

Q. Polls show the Iraqi population eager for a U.S. withdrawal, yet Iraq's elected leadership seems to strongly reject such calls. What do you think is going on?

**Gilbert Achcar.** I think that there is something here that must be clarified regarding the polls. What seems undisputable is that there is an overwhelming majority of Iraqis asking for a timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. troops. Naturally, few wish that the coalition troops evacuate the country all of a sudden in a precipitous manner, within say a few days, in the absence of agreement between the major Iraqi forces. That is because, in the present conditions, it could just leave the way wide-open for an all-out civil war in the country.

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/basra.jpg>]

But, at the same time, the great majority of Iraqis see that the very presence of these foreign troops is fueling the deterioration of the situation: it has fueled the growth of the insurgency for a long time, and now it is fueling the civil war itself. The sectarian strife is being constantly fueled indeed by the presence of U.S. troops and by the political behavior of the occupation authorities.

This is why people who want these troops out believe that this is one of the key conditions for restoring peace in the country – if that is still possible at all. Setting a deadline for the coalition troops' withdrawal, a timetable, would create favorable conditions – so many people believe – for speeding up the political process: it would allow the Iraqis to get to some kind of political agreement and find ways to stabilize the situation and reverse the sectarian war dynamics that have been unfolding.

This view is actually shared even by a major part of the establishment in the United States. When members of the establishment say: "We should set objectives, we should warn the Maliki government that if this or that is not achieved, we will withdraw our troops," that is indeed an acknowledgment of the fact that the very prospect of the departure of coalition troops from Iraq would put strong pressure on the Iraqis to reach a settlement.

But that is precisely what people in the antiwar movement have been saying for a long time, that the withdrawal of U.S. and coalition troops is one of the main conditions for any serious attempt to get out of the nightmarish situation that is unfolding in Iraq. It is only one of the major conditions, of course, and is not sufficient by itself. No one is saying that if the troops withdraw or a timetable is fixed, a miracle will occur and everything will become fine in Iraq. But, there is one thing that is obvious, at the very least, and that is that the presence of these troops is fostering the deterioration of the situation.

Paradoxically, the troops are actually providing a cover for various sectarian forces to launch their sectarian attacks, because they know that the presence of coalition troops prevents, to a certain degree, massive Iraqi retaliation and provides them with some impunity with regard to their sectarian opponents. We are in that situation. To go back to your question, a timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. and coalition troops is what the overwhelming majority of Iraqis want and what various anti-occupation Iraqi forces have been demanding for a long while now. That is what the Shiite Sadristes are demanding and fighting for politically and, on the Sunni side, that is what the Association of Muslim Scholars has also been demanding for a long time.

**Q. How do you judge Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki? Are his disagreements with Washington carefully staged to give him popular support or are they indicative of a genuine divergence of interests?**

**GA.** Staged? I do not think there is anything "staged" here because Maliki is not exactly the kind of actor with whom you would take the risk of engaging in any theater performance, especially if it co-stars George W. Bush! No, I think that there is a genuine divergence of interests at stake. They share some goals or, to put it more accurately, Maliki believes that he shares some goals with the U.S. administration. He believes that Washington shares his plan for building up the Iraqi official forces and letting the Iraqis gradually take control of the situation in their country.

This has been a stated goal of the Bush administration for a long time and the Maliki government obviously buys into this claimed purpose of the occupation, though not without some degree of skepticism. (They complain for instance that the bulk of Iraqi armed forces are not yet under their control and that these forces are not equipped with the needed weaponry.) But beyond that, there are many divergences among them: Maliki is a member of the Shiite coalition in Iraq and the permanent pressure of the Bush administration for more concessions to the Sunni side, or to former Baathists, are not to their liking.

In the same way, when the Bush administration exerts pressure on Maliki not to hamper a crackdown on Sadr's militias, that is also not to the taste of a prime minister who actually counts on Muqtada al-Sadr as an ally of his own Dawa party within the Shiite Coalition. One should not forget how Nuri al-Maliki was chosen for his post, after a fierce political fight within the Shiite coalition pitting his party against the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) who was supporting its own candidate, Adel Abdel-Mahdi. The fight was actually between the Dawa party's Ibrahim al-Jaafari and the SCIRI's Abdel-Mahdi. Jaafari was supported by Sadr and strongly opposed by Washington. A compromise "face-saving for both Washington and Sadr" was reached eventually, giving the position to Maliki, who is Jaafari's second-in-command. So Maliki still relies on the Sadrists and needs their support, if he is not to be pushed aside and replaced by Abdel-Mahdi.

Another area where there is obvious disagreement between the Bush administration and what Maliki represents is, of course, the issue of the relation to Iraq's regional environment "above all the attitude towards Iran. Maliki represents a coalition of forces that are very close to Iran. It is only natural that they do not share the views that prevail in the Bush administration, whereby Iran and Syria are designated as the regional villains, the main enemies and main source of trouble.

There are obvious differences therefore between Maliki and what he represents, on the one hand, and Washington on the other hand. That is actually why you hear so many complaints about Maliki and calls for removing him, in Washington and within the establishment. In the same way, you had strong complaints against his predecessor, Jaafari, which led the United States to fight harshly against the renewal of his mandate when it expired, after the December 2005 elections opened the way to forming a new government.

To be sure, there is a certain degree of collusion between Maliki and the U.S. occupation, and on that score, of course, there is a clear difference between the collusion that Maliki is engaged in and the hostility to the occupation of his allies in the Sadrist current. But despite this collusion, there is no total convergence of interests and Maliki is not just a "puppet" as he is depicted by some. That is excessively simplistic a characterization for such a complex situation.

**Q. The Bush administration has been pushing hard for the Iraqi National Assembly to enact a new oil law. Press reports seem to indicate that the law will be extremely lucrative to foreign oil companies. Is the Iraqi legislature preparing to turn the economy over to multinational corporations?**

**GA.** "Turn the economy over to multinational corporations" would also be an exaggerated statement. We still have to see what the final draft of the law that will be submitted for parliament's approval looks like. True, there have been some hints in the press about successive versions of the draft, but no report claimed to know for sure how the final document will be phrased. One thing seems certain: whatever law they pass will open the way for agreements with foreign companies.

That is for a simple and obvious reason, however: it is that Iraq by itself does not have the technological and financial means at present to repair and, even less so, to develop its oil infrastructure and production. The real issue is the kind of conditions or concessions that are going to be made available to foreign companies. We will have to see if there is going to be a real and proper debate about this issue in the legislative assembly. So all this is still an open question and, of course, there are forces fighting against granting any major concessions to foreign oil companies at the expense of Iraq's interests. The Federation of Oil Unions (previously General Union of Oil Employees) has been waging campaign after campaign against any disguised privatization of oil production and for maintaining and enhancing the gains that they do have nowadays, especially the participation of workers representatives in the management of the industry.

We shall see what happens when the final draft gets to the Parliament. Then after that, we shall see how any law, whatever law it is, will be implemented — for instance, with which foreign companies and under what conditions. Because then there will still be a wide margin for choice: will Washington be able to impose its own companies, or will the Iraqi government try to diversify its partners in the oil sector, including Russian, Chinese and — why not? — Iranian companies? This also remains to be seen.

**Q. A recent Pentagon report has said that Muqtada al-Sadr's militia is more of a threat to the U.S. military than is the insurgency and Newsweek has termed al-Sadr "the most dangerous man in Iraq." What do you make of these claims?**

**GA.** They are definitely correct. They are correct for one obvious reason. Not that Muqtada al-Sadr and his forces are doing more harm presently to the occupation troops than, for instance, some of the Sunni "insurgent" groups, as they are called. That is not the problem, although there are military actions undertaken continuously by the Sadrists against the occupation. The real issue is not purely military, but a combination of political and military considerations. Sadr is a formidable enemy of the occupation because he is very popular. He is the only force with a radical anti-occupation stance to enjoy massive popular support and have the ability to organize this support — moreover a support in the majority community, 60% of the Iraqi population, the Arab Shiites.

Add to that the fact that Muqtada al-Sadr entered into an alliance with Iran that increased very much the threat that he represents in Washington's eyes. That is why he is seen by the U.S. establishment unanimously as "the most dangerous man in Iraq." He definitely is that man. That is also why they will try by any means to get rid of him. He knows perfectly well that he is a priority target. He tries to protect himself, knowing that if they find a way to assassinate him, they will not hesitate to do so. His militias, the Mahdi Army, are also a major target.

One of the main goals of the Bush administration's so-called "new strategy" for Iraq is to try to foster a division within the Shiite coalition and create a coalition of forces that would include the Kurds, some Arab Sunni forces and those Arab Shiite forces willing to collaborate with the occupation. They wish to isolate Sadr so as to open the way to a crackdown on his militias. What remains to be seen is whether the other Shiite members of the Shiite coalition will agree to that scheme. For the time being, they do not seem to be trying to ostracize the Sadrists. The main reason is probably Iran, which has powerful leverage over these forces, especially the SCIRI. Tehran is vigilant; it is exerting strong pressure in order to thwart the scenario that Washington is trying to implement. Iran is working intensively to maintain the unity of the Shiite coalition and prevent any clash between Shiite forces, or a situation whereby the Sadrists would be left in isolation facing the occupation.

### **Q. How would you assess Muqtada al-Sadr?**

**GA.** First of all, Muqtada al-Sadr is, of course, a Shiite Islamic fundamentalist and very much so – just look at the "moral order" his followers impose in areas under their control. However, that is not his main single characteristic because there are many other brands of Islamic fundamentalism in Iraq and, for instance, all other major components of the Shiite United Iraqi Coalition are also Islamic fundamentalist forces.

In reality, the distinctive feature of Muqtada al-Sadr's current is the fact that it is a populist brand of Islamic fundamentalism. His populism translates, on the one hand, into a hard-line opposition to the occupation reflecting the aspirations of broad sections of the masses, especially in Baghdad where the occupation is faced most directly, and in some areas of the south. On the other hand, Sadr's populism is expressed in the fact that his movement tries to speak for the masses in their protest against their very poor living conditions. They speak and organize against the lack of public services, against all such shortcomings, while making sure to always blame the occupation – and not Maliki's (or before him Jaafari's) government – as bearing responsibility for the miserable conditions. It is through championing such demands as well as through its radical anti-occupation stance that the Sadrist current was able to build, in a matter of a couple of years, an impressive force.

At the beginning of the occupation, in the first months, Sadr's was a small group and some tended to believe that it would remain negligible. But after a few months, it started growing until you had the clashes with the occupation in 2004. The Sadrist current was already acknowledged to have become a serious threat to the occupation, and it continued to build itself after that period mainly through political means, achieving a very strong presence in the country. It is believed to be the most popular militant current among the Shiites.

The sectarian anti-Shiite attack in Samarra in February 2006, almost one year ago, was a major turning point in the Iraqi situation and very much precipitated the slide into sectarian war. The Mahdi Army, that is the militias that claim allegiance to Muqtada al-Sadr, or at least major sections of the Mahdi Army, took part in the sectarian retaliations that occurred in reaction to the Samarra attack. In the year elapsed since then, sections of the Mahdi Army have been deeply involved in the sectarian war.

In the eyes of their community, they appear as defensive forces protecting the Shiite areas against incursions by Sunni sectarian forces. But in Arab Sunnis' eyes, they appear as a Shiite sectarian force and are accused of conducting sectarian crimes, reprisals, mass killings and so on. To be sure, this has greatly affected the credibility that Sadr enjoyed in 2004 and 2005 as a non-sectarian, Iraqi Arab nationalist force opposed to the occupation. His image is now reduced to that of a sectarian Shiite force, an armed wing of the Shiite community. This, of course, has badly affected his own political project, which was to build his leadership as a cross-sectarian Iraqi one.

### **Q. Some accounts have suggested that some members of Sadr's Mahdi Army are no longer under Sadr's control. Does this seem to you to be the case?**

**GA.** I do believe that that is perfectly true. Sadr's Mahdi Army is quite different from the SCIRI's Badr organization. The latter is a quasi-military organization that was built and trained in exile in Iran, when Saddam Hussein was still in power, and which came back to Iraq after the U.S. invasion. It is an organization with a strong command structure, military-like centralization and functioning, whereas the Mahdi Army is a ragtag army that has developed under the occupation, almost from scratch. As I mentioned, it built itself at the beginning by raising the banner of the fight against the occupation, before it got involved in the sectarian war. But it has grown under both political conditions and grown impressively, without any preset organization or command structure, or whatever. It has been developing in an almost mushrooming manner over the last year. It is therefore very, very difficult to control it.

Muqtada al-Sadr does not have any appropriate structure for exerting real control over such an important force and, as a consequence, there are whole sections of the Mahdi Army that are actually beyond his control. They refer to Muqtada al-Sadr as a political symbol, a political leadership. They bear his name, but they are not involved in any pyramidal hierarchy that would be anything close to the military structure of the Badr organization. So, yes, in that sense, there are sections, if not most of the Mahdi army, that are beyond Muqtada al-Sadr's direct control. He retains political influence, to be sure, but that is not the same as control over armed forces, especially when you get in the heat of battle, or retaliation, or reprisal.

### **Q. Is Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani still the most influential figure in the country?**

**GA.** The reply to this question is somewhat similar to what we have just talked about. That is, if Muqtada al-Sadr himself cannot really control the "army" that claims to be his, then how could anyone expect Sistani to exert any real control over the whole Shiite population? If we mean spiritual influence and even political influence in the broad sense, he is still influential and respected. But it is clear that the situation got out of his own control too when the country started drowning into sectarian war one year ago, after the Samarra attack. That was not only a defeat for Muqtada al-Sadr's political project but in a sense it was also a major defeat for Sistani who had been instrumental until then in preventing an all-out explosion of the situation and especially in preventing massive reprisals by the Shiites.

He had issued many fatwas and statements, going as far as saying that even if thousands of them were killed in sectarian attacks, Iraqi Shiites should not get into reprisals and be attracted to the logic of the sectarian war, falling thus into a trap. But, whatever influence he commands, Sistani can just exert it through proclamations and religious, spiritual authority. There is a point when the situation gets so bad that such type of influence is neutralized: it does not work anymore and that is exactly what happened. The Samarra attack was the "straw that broke the camel's back" — the single event that completely turned the situation.

Of course, it built on a long accumulation of events preceding it: so many sectarian attacks against the Shiites, so many suicide attacks, car bombs and all that, killing hundreds after hundreds of Shiites and therefore creating a very deep resentment among them. Until Samarra, the Shiites were still able to control themselves at the mass level, although there was, to be sure, a lot of sectarian reprisal going on through various channels, one of them being the Ministry of Interior when it came under the control of the Badr organization. But the Samarra attack just made this accumulation reach the point where control was no longer possible, whether spiritual influence by Sistani or political control by Muqtada al-Sadr over his own troops.

### **Q. Has the sectarian violence in Iraq passed the point of no return? Is all-out civil war inevitable?**

**GA.** That is difficult to tell. One can only hope that it is not the case and in order to verify that, the only possibility, as I said already, is to set a timetable for the withdrawal of coalition troops, which would compel the major Iraqi forces to try to find some sort of modus vivendi, some way of living together pending a future lasting settlement. Other than that, it is very difficult to make any prognosis. Let me repeat that no one can safely predict whether there is still a way out of the situation without an all-out explosion or not. The only established fact is that the presence of U.S. troops is not helping in preventing the worst outcome, and the longer it stays, the worse it is getting anyway. Ever since the occupation started, there has been a steady deterioration of the situation. And it is certainly not the so-called "surge" that George W. Bush has just announced that will magically reverse this trend!

### **Q. Who do you think would have the upper hand in an all-out civil war?**

**GA.** That also depends on too many factors. It is a very complex situation. In order to give any kind of answer to this

question, you have to try to guess "what kind of civil war, of whom against whom?" Because it is not so simple, it is not just Shiites vs. Sunnis. You also have the Kurdish factor. And, among the Shiites as well as among the Sunnis, there are important divisions. If you had an all-out war, whom would it exactly pit against whom is quite hard to tell. In terms of sectarian/ethnic areas, you would naturally see the completion of the "cleansing" that has been occurring for the last couple of years.

[[https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/predator\\_mask.jpg](https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/predator_mask.jpg)]

Beyond that "cleansing," the war could turn from one of maneuver to one of positions, more or less stabilizing a partition of the country. Shiites would find little incentive to try to invade Arab Sunni areas, let alone Kurdish areas, and Arab Sunnis would have to acknowledge the fact that they stand no chance at beating the much more numerous Shiites backed by Iran. The spot around which a protracted war could go on for a longer period is Kirkuk: the Arab Sunnis and the Kurds being roughly equal in number, they would fight fiercely to get hold of, or recover, this oil-producing area, which is the only important oil area that any of the two communities could reasonably see as within its reach.

## U.S. policy

**Q. The U.S. occupation of Iraq has obviously been a disaster, even from the point of view of U.S. elite interests. There is a lot of second-guessing going on now trying to explain how this catastrophe came about. Was it wrong to disband the army and order de-Baathification?**

**GA.** Was it wrong? It depends for whom! From the point of view of U.S. imperial interests, from the point of view of U.S. control over Iraq, the Bush administration made only the wrong choices all along, ever since it decided to invade the country. One could argue, from that angle, that the decision to invade the country by itself was a major mistake. However, one could still say that there could have been efficient ways for U.S. imperial control to be imposed over Iraq through military intervention, ways that involve a serious attempt at cutting a deal with major segments of the Iraqi Baathist state apparatus. That was possible, it was envisaged and even prepared, but discarded briefly before the invasion.

There was indeed a possibility from the viewpoint of U.S. imperial interests at least to try to run Iraq through major chunks of the Baathist apparatus, but without Saddam Hussein, and to get in this way what they are most interested in — that is, major influence over the country, control over its oil production and exports. Therefore, from that angle, yes, disbanding the army and de-Baathification was a deadly mistake. But, was it morally wrong? Was it wrong from the point of view of Arab Shiites' interests? This is why I said that "Was it wrong" depends on "For whom?" De-Baathification — except for its excesses — was certainly not morally wrong, because the Baath was such a terribly murderous dictatorship. The rest is a problem of calculation depending on which interests you are putting in the balance. Seen from the angle of Arab Shiites' interests, thoroughly dismantling the Baathist state apparatus was definitely an indispensable condition for achieving real majority rule in Iraq.

**Q. Do you think that a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq will lead to even worse sectarian violence? Will withdrawal lead to the victory of either Baathists or Islamic fundamentalists?**

**GA.** Victory of Islamic fundamentalists is something you can already take for granted. The Baathists no longer have enough clout for them to be able to achieve control of the situation again — probably not even in the Arab Sunni areas alone. From what one can gather from Iraqi sources, it does not seem like there is any longer any major control exerted by the Baathist apparatus, in a centralized or organized way. Remnants of the Baathist apparatus, for the most part, have split into various groups that do not claim any allegiance to Baathism. Actually, to a certain extent, it

seems that al-Qaeda has achieved more force in Iraq than whatever remains of the loyalist apparatus of the "Saddamist" Baath. Now, that brings me back to your question about all-out civil war. What you would get would be the de-facto split of the country: the country will be divided into different areas based, on the one hand, on sectarian or ethnic differences, and on the other hand, probably, on different political forces.

That is, you will not have a homogenous Arab Sunni area, but various Sunni forces controlling segments of the area and clashing among themselves, with a similar pattern on the Shiite side. The two major Kurdish forces clashed violently some years ago, and could very likely clash again. This is the most likely outcome of an all-out war. It would resemble the kind of situation that prevailed in my own country, Lebanon, after 1975, when the country was not only split into two broad camps, but fell under the control of various warlords and sub-entities inside each camp – a pattern repeated later in Afghanistan. A neologism was invented to describe this situation: "Lebanonization." Iraq, indeed, runs the risk of complete "Lebanonization."

**Q. The U.S. has seized and detained Iranians in Iraq and has been accusing Iran of meddling in the country. The Bush administration has charged that some of the sophisticated explosive devices being used against US troops in Iraq come from Iran, with training provided by Hezbollah. What do you think Iran is up to? Are Iran-backed Shiite groups engaged in military encounters with U.S. forces?**

**GA.** Yes, definitely. Iraqi Shiite forces are waging a resistance fight against the coalition troops. If you visit the websites dedicated to the Mahdi Army or the Sadrists, you will find a long list of military operations against occupation troops as well as complaints about media blackout. They complain that the media do not report resistance actions in Shiite areas, but only actions taking place in Sunni areas. There is definitely a resistance struggle in the Shiite areas, mainly through "IEDs" (Improvised Explosive Devices) and the like, more than through direct frontal attacks against occupation troops, although you can also read about the latter kind of actions. Now, to believe that Iran is helping this in some ways makes sense – it is not absurd at all. One would very much understand why Iran would have some interest in backing this, provided its backing does not appear too openly. Iran resorts very likely to what in the United States is called "covert action," a kind of action of which the U.S. is very much a specialist, as you know. What would Iran try to achieve through that? On the one hand, of course, it is definitely in Tehran's interest that U.S. troops remain stuck in a quagmire in Iraq at a time when the U.S. administration is trying to put Iran in a corner, exert strong pressure on it, threaten it with military action, and so on.

On the other hand, Iran is engaged in a regional struggle with Washington and there are two aspects of that. One is defensive, since it is Washington that is on the offensive, targeting Iran, speaking of regime change and all the rest. It is not Tehran that is trying to force regime change in Washington, but the reverse – although you might say that Tehran is interested in hastening the political defeat of the Bush administration, but that is not exactly the same kind of "regime change"! The other aspect of the Iranian regional struggle, which could go beyond the defensive, is that Tehran is interested in extending its influence in the area to form a kind of buffer zone, or a protective area of friendly states. It has also an interest in the economic field; if you recall, when I was speaking about oil, I said that the Iraqis could also cut deals with Iranian oil companies, because Iran has some means in that regard, though nothing comparable to what Western oil companies have. There is finally the ideological factor that should not be belittled: both the Islamic fundamentalist dimension, appealing to all brands of Islamic fundamentalism, whether Shiite or Sunni, and the sectarian dimension. By the latter, I mean Shiite sectarian solidarity, which extends beyond Iraq and Lebanon to the oppressed Shiites populating the oil producing areas of the Saudi Kingdom, as well as to those who constitute the oppressed majority in Bahrain, and many other Shiite minorities in the broader Middle East. If you put all these factors together, you get an idea of the set of incentives and motivations that stand behind Iranian actions in the area.

**Q. What do you see as the likely consequences of various policy proposals that have been put forward:**



**(a) Bush's "surge," adding some 21,000 more U.S. troops**

**(b) the Baker-Hamilton committee recommendations;**

**(c) the Peter Galbraith-Joe Biden-Leslie Gelb proposal to divide Iraq into three separate countries.**

**GA.** The main aspect of the "surge" is not the 21,000 additional U.S. troops. If it were only that, it would actually be almost ridiculous, because when you already have over 130,000 on the spot, adding 20,000 and believing that they will qualitatively change the situation would be completely nonsensical. The so called "surge" is actually part of a general maneuver through which the Bush administration, as I said already, is trying to set up a coalition of Iraqi forces including the Kurds, with some of the Arab Sunni and Shiite forces, in order to isolate the Sunni extremist insurgency, on the one hand, and Muqtada al-Sadr, who is regarded as the main enemy, on the other hand.

The Bush administration is trying to do all that without what constitutes the most important and "original" element in the Baker-Hamilton proposal, which is to seek some accommodation and regional engagement with Iran and Syria in order to get their help in stabilizing Iraq under U.S. suzerainty. This is precisely why I believe that this strategy, Washington's current one, has no real chance of success. In substance, the Bush administration is actually accelerating into a roadblock. They are showing themselves as completely stubborn and unable to draw any real lessons from their own experience.

Now, let me turn to the Baker-Hamilton recommendations. They are based on the kind of scenario through which the United States left Vietnam. That consisted, under Nixon, in engaging the Soviet Union and China, after acknowledging the depth of the quagmire in Vietnam and the huge difficulty faced there by the United States, greatly complicated by the deteriorating front at home. Against this general situation and adversity, the Nixon-Kissinger administration, in the most "realist" manner, decided to engage with the sponsors of the Vietnamese resistance and to try to play one against the other.

They sought to drive the wedge further between China and the Soviet Union, which is a strategic maneuver that the supporters of the Baker-Hamilton line would also like to seek to implement. That is, they would like to try to detach Syria from Iran and cut different deals with each of them, playing on the possible contradictions between the two regimes. This would make more sense than Bush's all-out confrontationist stance from a position of weakness. It would be a more rational strategy given all the odds faced now by the U.S. in Iraq. But then, like in Vietnam, there is absolutely no guarantee of success. It might well help the U.S. disentangle from Iraq, but it cannot guarantee any long-term control by the U.S. over Iraq. It could just lead, like in Vietnam in 1975, to a total loss of the country in the short or medium-term.

As for the proposals to divide Iraq into three parts, in the present conditions at least such proposals would surely be denounced by major sections of the Iraqis as an imperialist plot to partition the country, as there were so many of them in the modern history of the Middle East. Besides, the most serious problem here, from the point of view of U.S. imperial interests, is that it would end up creating a Shiite state in southern Iraq. A Shiite state which would naturally control the most important part of Iraq's oil because it is in the Shiite areas in southern Iraq that the bulk of Iraq's oil reserves lie.

This would create a huge problem potentially for the United States, because such a Shiite state "by the very dynamics of regional politics, let alone the fact that the most important Iraqi Shiite forces today are close to Iran" would ally itself with Iran and stand in opposition to the Saudi kingdom. In light of what I mentioned about the Shiite-populated oil producing areas of the Saudi kingdom, this would lead to a scenario worse still for Washington's interests than whatever there is now. But, in the first place and in any case, trying to implement this idea of three

separate entities would actually entail an all-out civil war: instead of being an outcome of such a war, it would then be a source of it!

All these proposals only show that the U.S. design for control over Iraq is very, very seriously compromised at present. That is why you have so many articles blaming the Bush administration for having messed it up completely and being responsible for what looks already as probably the most important defeat for the U.S. imperial project, at least in recent history.

### **Q. What do you think Washington will do next?**

**GA.** For this I have no answer because I do not believe that the members of the Bush administration themselves know what they will do next. They are trying to navigate on sight, refusing to acknowledge that the ship is sinking.

### **Q. To what extent has the antiwar movement had an impact on policy or policymakers?**

**GA.** This is a question that, for the U.S., you are in a better position to answer than I am, for you live there. However, if we look beyond the United States at the other countries involved in the war, we have seen that the antiwar movement has made a real difference. I am thinking of Spain and of Italy, and other countries where the antiwar movement has led to their withdrawal from the "coalition of the willing." Moreover, the decisive contribution of the Iraq war issue to Tony Blair's loss of face is well known. In the United States, as long as the Bush administration was able to get an electoral majority, it could more or less ignore the pressure of the antiwar movement, especially since the movement, except for few peaks, could not maintain its activities at a high level in a sustained manner. Still we have seen that the protracted political campaign against the war and the revelations of what is going on in Iraq have led to the rejection of the Bush administration and the Republican majority in the last election.

By this, I am not trying to say that the present congressional majority is antiwar "far from it. Nevertheless, they were brought to their present majority by the rejection of Bush's policies: both his foreign policy as embodied in his Iraqi adventure and, of course, his domestic policy as exemplified by the Katrina disaster. The fact that today you have such a very strong division in the establishment on the issue of Iraq is also a testimony to the importance of the antiwar movement and its pressure, which gets more effective when facts tend to confirm its stance in an undisputable manner" and that is the case in Iraq.

### **Q. What should the antiwar movement be calling for now?**

**GA.** The same that it has been, and should have been, calling for from the beginning. That is "Out Now": in the United States, a request for ending U.S. involvement in Iraq. It means demanding that the U.S. administration decide to leave Iraq and set a timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. troops in a period not exceeding few months. That would meet the demand of the majority of the Iraqi population, as well as the wishes of the majority of the U.S. population.

*[Interviewed by Stephen R. Shalom and Chris Spannos for ZNet](#) on January 18, 2007, and edited by Achcar.*