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Middle East

The imperialist strategy of the US in the Middle East

- Features - Palestine -

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Since the objective of this seminar is to focus on the Israeli-Arab and Israeli-Palestinian questions, it is best to approach the theme of United States strategy from this angle in particular. Because on the one hand we do not have enough time for a general exposé on everything the US is doing in the region, and on the other, because to a significant degree that would only have an indirect relationship with the central theme of this meeting. But these questions intersect, as you will see.

The starting point in discussing US strategy in this part of the world is defining and then recognising the motives - what is it that drives the US in their intervention in the region?

The main motive for the US intervention in this area of the world, and this largely goes back to the post First World War period, is of course the question of oil. The US interest in this part of the world stems from its extraordinary wealth in oil resources. I will not amplify this point, you know the figures, I wish simply to stress that the question of oil cannot be reduced to an economic question – we are not here talking about “vulgar economism”.

The question of oil certainly includes an economic dimension, a dimension that some tend to underestimate through rejection of “vulgar economism”. In fact, the economic dimension is very important; it is enough to see the placing of the big US oil companies in the list of big US firms in general. They appear regularly at the head of the list in recent decades, and throughout the 20th century, and they are well anchored with the trend of oil prices.

There is then a considerable weight of oil interests in the determination of US policy. In other words, the “oil lobby”, the oil companies, have a considerable weight in US foreign policy, and this is moreover nothing new. Whoever studies US foreign policy can note it. People like David Rockefeller, whose family is based on oil wealth, have played a key role in the determination of US foreign policy. Institutions as significant in this policy as the Council on Foreign Relations (which produces the review “Foreign Affairs”) come from there. And throughout history, through the US presidencies since the 1920s, we see how a good part of the determination of foreign policy, in any case so far as those regions of the world possessing oil are concerned, has been the doing of the oil companies and of their intervention with the executive in Washington.

But, and this was my point of departure, the question is not reduced solely to this economic interest, which only represents a part, certainly a central one, of US big business. Beyond this, and because of the nature of oil, there is a strategic interest which concerns US capital as a whole and thus US imperialism as a whole as determinant mechanism of policy.

The question of oil is strategic above all: you all know to what point it has become a primordial strategic commodity (and increasingly so since the First World War which accelerated the passage from coal to oil). This has led the US to accord to the Middle East a strategic importance of the first level in their global policy. The strategic value of oil made control of access to oil a major strategic asset. The question of US access to oil has become increasingly important due to the depletion of US oil reserves, and thus the growing dependence of the US in relation to oil imports. The threshold of 50% has been crossed and the US is then in a logic of growing dependency on foreign oil.

But the access enjoyed by the US itself is only one dimension of the problem and the other dimension, equally important, is control over the access of others. On the one hand control over the access to oil of allies, or “vassal” powers, imperialisms which enjoy a vassal relationship with the US. This control allows the US to increase the dependency of these powers with respect to them. On the other hand control of the access of potential enemies, and

this question has gained increasing importance in the recent historic period with the rise of China. Previously, at the time of bipolarity, the global counterweight to the US was the Soviet Union, which was itself an oil exporter and thus had no supply problems. However, the last 20 years have seen the rise of China, which depends enormously on energy imports: China has hardly any oil, above all in the light of its growing needs because of its economic growth, and this dependency can only increase the strategic value of the oil question.

To all this one can add other considerations still linked to oil: for example on the economic level. When the US imposes itself as overlord in the region, they do so in relation to their allies (Japan, extremely dependent on oil imports, still more than China or Western Europe) but also their "local protégés": the oil monarchies of the region. The most important among them being the Saudi kingdom, which alone holds a quarter of world oil reserves and thus plays a completely determinant role on the oil market. US supervision of the Saudi kingdom is a major dimension of the question, and it is also reflected by another aspect of major importance for the US for more than 30 years: these allies, these oil monarchies re-export petrodollars largely to the US, contributing thus to the financing by the rest of the world of US imperialism, the financing of the US federal budget through various mechanisms of which the purchase of treasury bonds is the most important.

It is above all this which is, from a Marxist, and indeed quite simply a realist, viewpoint, the sole explanation which stands up as to the motivation of what the US does, their interest in this part of the world. And it is here that the debate on the question of Israel comes in.

As you probably know, there are schematically two viewpoints on the US-Israel relationship. A viewpoint which is traditionally that of the left and the anti-imperialist movement, including the Arab anti-imperialist movement, in a fairly clear manner – I refer for example to Nasser who was quite clear in this respect. This viewpoint is to consider Israel as a "guard dog" – to use a lapidary and very current formula – for the interests of US imperialism in the region. Or even the interests of imperialism in general, since at the time when this type of vision of Israel was developed, the interests that Israel served were not yet obviously those of the US, and I will return to this point. A guard dog then, as it was the founder of state Zionism himself, Theodore Herzl, had spoken of an "advance post" of what he called "civilisation" at the heart of "barbarism" in the language of colonialism. And in fact this vision of Israel as "advance post" of world imperialism is the traditional vision of the anti-imperialist movement, of left anti-imperialist nationalism, and beyond. Thus, during the 2006 war, Hezbollah general secretary Hassan Nasrallah said in a speech that for him things were clear enough: Israel worked on behalf of the US. Beyond this, there is a vast spectrum of tendencies who share this type of analysis.

And then there is another analysis that tends to present Israel as manipulating the US. Obviously, if Israel manipulates the US, a transmission belt is needed: this is "the Jews". This is a vision which places Israel at the centre and imputes to it the regional policy of the US, with fairly obvious anti-Semitic overtones. On this type of position, you have all of the reactionary regimes, monarchies or others, of the region, and in particular those who depend the most on the US, as well as the ideologies of the fundamentalist type, the Pan-Islamisms of the fundamentalist type informed by an anti-Semitic world vision. The central goal, in the case of the reactionary regimes, is to explain that if the US supports Israel it is not because it is an imperialist power, but because of the weight and the role of the Jews, and the possibility of Israel using this "Jewish lobby" as they call it. With as political consequence the idea that the Arabs should counteract this by courting Washington to try to change the policy of the US in a direction more favourable to Arab interests. The political function of this type of vision is fairly obvious.

We have seen a similar debate develop in the West, and in the US itself. With the same type of cleavage: traditionally the left, the anti-imperialists, in the US see Israel, first and foremost, as an instrument of their own imperialism, an instrument used by the élite of US power, big business, to serve its interests. One could go further and explain to what point this instrument is extremely effective for the US. We know that Israel is the main recipient of US foreign aid, but the three billion dollars that the US gives to Israel annually is a drop in the ocean in relation to the US military budget, whereas the return from this finance is incomparably more important than the marginal yield of three more

billions added to this budget. Three billion more or less would change nothing at all in the military performance of the US; on the contrary, the role that Israel plays as an allied military force is absolutely fundamental.

We have recently seen a debate on the question of the "Israeli lobby". This time the two professors who have launched this debate are in no way anti-Semites. There certainly is a pro-Israeli lobby, and this isn't an anti-Semitic fantasy. There is a very official existence – in a country characterised by the lobbying system – and it is not exclusively Jewish: we have even seen in recent years the rise of "Christian Zionism", in the form of extremist Protestant Christians who for ideologically extravagant reasons are fervent supporters of Israel and Israeli extremism (there has even been an evangelical preacher who has said that Sharon's coma was a punishment from God because he had ordered the withdrawal from Gaza). In the view of Mearsheimer and Walt, the pro-Israel lobby would have too great a weight, too significant in US policy: this is the problem, and that would explain why the US does things which are not in their national interest. Of course this notion of "national interest" is specific to this type of "realist" political vision and it is not a notion that we share. The two professors in question form part of the US establishment and belong to the "realist" current, and they constructed their argument at a time when the US quagmire in Iraq had become patent, claiming that it was Israel's fault that the US had invaded Iraq, when this was not in its national interest.

That has been broadly contested, including on the factual front: we now know that Israel asked, before the invasion of Iraq, that the US confront Iran instead, since that was the main enemy while Iraq was in no position to cause trouble (except for those who could seriously believe that it possessed weapons of mass destruction, but Israel was not among them). On the contrary, Iran is considered as the main enemy of Israel, and remains the priority from the Israeli viewpoint. And there we can see the limits of the coincidence, of the competition between the interests of the US for which Iraq is a major objective for the reasons that I have explained, and those of Israel which has its own strategic considerations. Behind the vision of the excessive weight of the "Israeli lobby" there is a vision of US policy: US democracy is seen as the result of a competition of multiple lobbies, a kind of free market. There is here a complete myth of US policy and US democracy, in which this vision inserts itself, whereas the vision of the left is centred on the elite of power, the possessing class and the weight of big business in US foreign policy.

If we observe historic developments, it is obvious enough that history illustrates one thesis well and contradicts the other. Consider the intervention of the US in the region. Well before the birth of Israel the Saudi kingdom had become the main regional ally of the US: this importance accorded to the Saudi kingdom was reflected in the meeting between Roosevelt and the Saudi king in 1944, and by the construction at the heart of the Saudi oil-producing region (of course), of what was one of the main US military bases outside the country after the Second World War. The US, like the Soviet Union and all of the world powers, supported the creation of the state of Israel in 1947, but in terms of real and concrete support to the Zionist movement, the Soviet Union played a much greater role than the US, in relation to arms deliveries in particular. I speak of the US as a government, not of the US Zionist organisations which gave financial support. After the war of 1948, the US decreed an arms embargo on weapons deliveries to the belligerents for several years. Thus Israel's sophisticated weaponry was supplied by France (aviation and so on.). We know moreover that Israel's access to nuclear weaponry was thanks to France. So it was French imperialism that had the closest relations with Israel. British imperialism less so, given the past history between London and the Zionist movement. And when in 1956 the tripartite Franco-British-Israeli aggression against Egypt came, following the nationalisation of the Suez Canal, it was alongside these two imperialisms that Israel intervened, while the US on the contrary condemned the aggression and even addressed an ultimatum to the three countries to stop fighting and withdraw their troops.

We see then that the idea of an Israel which manipulates the US does not fit in with the facts. From the early 1960s there was a significant change in the region: the rise of Arab nationalism, and the almost absolute "divorce", from the end of the 1950s, between this nationalism and the US after a period of hesitation. During the first years of Nasser's accession to power, the US could be perceived as a non-colonial power, a country which respected the independence of nations, but this perception quickly faded. The rise of Arab nationalism forced the US to withdraw

from their Saudi base in 1962. At the same time the rise of Soviet influence in the region from 1955, with the beginning of arms deliveries and the fairly close relation that developed between Nasser's Egypt and Moscow, considerably strengthened Israel's value as a US ally in the region. It was, then, from the 1960s that Israel became in the US view a major strategic asset. From 1966, the US began deliveries of sophisticated weaponry to Israel, and the 1967 war (Tom Segev's recent book shows it well) was the first war in which Israel directly served US interests as well as its own. And with the success that we are aware of. Which meant that after 1967, Israel became a highly appreciated US ally. We know that this 1967 war led, quite rapidly, to a radical change in the region: the marginalisation of Soviet influence, Egypt's shift out of the Soviet sphere towards the US under Sadat and so on. However, the US remained confined outside the region. In 1979, the Iranian revolution appeared as an unprecedented threat to the oil zone, and for the US, reeling from the "Vietnam syndrome" since the withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973, the importance of Israel could only grow. To obtain a green light from Congress for military intervention the US executive often needed a lot of time, whereas Israel was an advance post, capable of intervening any time.

This situation continued until 1990, the year of the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, the year of the return – much more strongly than before – of the US in the region, notably on Saudi territory. With this return, Israel's strategic value for the US diminished. And this was apparent immediately, from 1990-91 with the injunction given to Israel not to respond to the firing of Iraqi Scud missiles at its territory, because that would hinder the US, and up to the struggle between Washington and the Shamir government to force the latter to participate in the Madrid conference in autumn 1991 and the beginning of the "peace process". The US had acquired an unprecedented hegemony in the region and then posed the objective of stabilising it; that necessarily meant a settlement of the Israeli-Arab conflict. We know what followed: Oslo, then a stalemate of the process accompanied by the rise of Iran. With the end of the Iraq-Iran war and the embargo imposed on Iraq after 1991, the fact that the mutual neutralisation between Iraq and Iran ceased, and given the state that Iraq was in, the field was left free for Iran. That revived the interest in Israel as an ally, all the more given the rise of Al-Qaida from the 1990s onwards, the pressure on the Saudi regime to again obtain the withdrawal of US troops from its territory – because of the flagrant contradiction with Wahabi ideology created by the presence of non-Muslim troops in the country of Islam's holy places – became ever stronger. All this re-established the importance of Israel, which would again grow after September 11, 2001 and the beginning of the US military intervention on a regional scale in 2003. The effort that this represented for the US above all from the viewpoint of personnel, then their quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan, made them appear as incapable of acting in case of the opening of a third front. To summarise, there is a fluctuation in the value of Israel, not in the strategic sense – strategically Israel remains an essential asset – but in the sense that, at times, it is the indispensable ally to be cherished, whereas at other times, the US is in a position where it can exert pressure on Israel, as in 1991.

The question posed today is the following: are we again, after the green light the Bush administration gave Israel in recent years, in a period where we will see tensions surge between the US and Israel under the new Obama administration?

It's possible. I don't say that it's probable, but only possible. Moreover there is a kind of distance which is being established between an administration which witnesses to a return of the pendulum, limited as it is, in relation to the Bush administration – but this is easy, given that the Bush administration was the most reactionary in US history – and at the same time the ongoing slide to the right in Israel, producing an ever more right wing political landscape. That began progressively 30 years ago and is going from bad to worse. There is then a distance, to which we can add the statements of the new US administration desirous of resuming dialogue with Iran, conscious of the terrible damage done to the interests of US imperialism by the Bush administration and the disastrous fashion in which it has managed all this, and wishing to rectify the situation. That could cause tensions between the Israeli government and the US. But what will remain determinant is the US military position in the region and so long as it remains bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan; their margin of pressure on Israel will be minimal.

However, and here I conclude, I believe that there is no need to explain here what tensions could emerge, even if

they were comparable to the relatively strong tensions of 1990-91, we are not in the presence of a US which would seek to impose on Israel a "solution" acceptable to the Arab side/ There is simply the will to obtain more moderation and cooperation from Israel, but still with the objective of facilitating the essential task of the US in the region, namely the control of the region, which involves a cleavage between the allies of the US who it is necessary to strengthen – hence the problem with Israel which weakens them, it is enough to think of Mahmoud Abbas, extremely weakened by the Israeli attitude – and the enemies of the US, who must be crushed or bought off. There could then be tensions, but enemies will remain enemies and US support for Israel in that combat will not change. On the other hand, we could see pressures in the direction of a more conciliatory Israeli attitude faced with the concerted initiative of the Arab regimes, and we see moreover at this time a Saudi media offensive to request that the new administration change course.