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Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, and the Anti-War Movement

"The U.S. is sowing the seeds of a long term tragedy..."

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This interview was conducted on May 20, 2008 by Cinzia Nachira for the critical review Mesele (Question), printed in Turkey. It is published in the June 2008 issue of the review.

Mesele: 2008 is the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of Israel and of the Nakba, the Palestinian catastrophe. What do you see as the Israeli goal and has it changed over the years? What is the current Israeli strategy regarding both Gaza and the West Bank?

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GA: These are many questions. Well, first of all the continuity between 1948 and today is of course that of the initial and basic Zionist project of seizing the whole of Palestine, British mandate Palestine. This was only partially achieved in 1948, as the Israeli state was founded roughly on 80% of this territory. It was considered then as a first step only, as we know now from all the biographies, documents, and archives of the Zionist leaders and especially of Ben Gurion "the first stage in a drive to control the whole land.

Those conditions were fulfilled in 1967 when Israel invaded and occupied the rest of Palestine, to the west of the Jordan River. So since 1967, which is the second major turning point in the history of the conflict, the problem of Israel has been to implement the initial project that started in 1948 in the 1967 occupied territories through the building of colonial settlements, settler-colonialism. However, there was a major difference between 1948 and 1967 and that is the main problem for Israel today. The difference is that in 1948 80% of the population in the territories controlled by Israel fled the war. They were terrorized, directly or indirectly, and fled like any civilian population would do during a war. As everyone knows, they were prevented from coming back and became refugees, constituting a majority of the Palestinian people. In the territories that Israel occupied in 1967, however, the same process did not happen because the population had learned the lessons of 1948 and understood that if they fled their homes they would not be allowed to come back.

Therefore most of them stayed this time. They had also learned from 1948 that they would not be massacred if they stayed: this is what they had feared back in 1948. Israel kept a Palestinian Arab minority within its territory after 1948 and since those who stayed then remained alive, the majority followed their example in 1967. Ever since Israel has been trying to solve this problem, which is the biggest problem it is facing: the population of the West Bank and Gaza. This population is itself composed of a large proportion of refugees from the 1948 territories in addition to the autochthonous people of the West Bank and Gaza. They are opposing and rejecting Israeli control over their territories.

What Israel is striving to secure, since it cannot simply expel the Palestinian population, is control over the territory of the West Bank by means of a network of settlements, strategic and military posts, roads and walls, etc. in order to keep the Palestinians in separated enclaves under Israeli control in the same way that Gaza as a whole is a kind of enclave under full Israeli military control from outside, something like a huge concentration camp.

This is what many call the demographic dead end of Israel. Now Israel cannot be both Jewish and democratic at the same time.

This is indeed Israel's problem. The whole issue relates to this oxymoron, that a state pretends to be both democratic and ethnically defined as Jewish. This is a contradiction in terms because if you define a state by its ethnic or religious character, you are already contradicting modern democratic values. Of course, in order to make credible this

fallacy, this so-called democratic Jewish state, you need to ensure an overwhelming Jewish majority among citizens of the state.

This is what Zionists had in 1948. They accepted a minority of Arab Palestinians among them " 15-20% in 1948 " as an alibi allowing them to say: Ours is a democratic state; it is Jewish by virtue of the fact that over 80% of our population is Jewish. However, after they took over the West Bank and Gaza with the bulk of the Palestinian Arab population remaining there, it was not possible for them to annex these territories as they did with those conquered in 1948. Israel annexed only Jerusalem in 1967, and later the Golan in 1981. But it did not annex the rest of the West Bank and Gaza. Why not? From the standpoint of Zionist ideology, the West Bank is much more important to Israel than the Golan.

The point is, however, that the Golan has only a small Arab population and today Israeli settlers in the Golan are actually almost as numerous as autochthonous Arabs " who, incidentally, belong overwhelmingly to the Druze sect that Israel always considered as integrable (Druze serve in the Israeli Army, contrarily to other "Arab Israelis"). As for Jerusalem, it was annexed straightaway in 1967 because of its very great symbolic value. But they could not annex the rest of the occupied land, because if they did, they would either have a vast population within Israeli territory deprived of rights or, were they to grant them citizen rights, the Jewish character of the state would have been jeopardized. In other words, had they annexed the West Bank and Gaza, the Israeli state would have either ceased being Jewish or ceased being democratic in the sense of equal rights, one person one vote, etc.

This is indeed the great dilemma of Zionism, which they tried to solve with the Allon Plan, designed in 1967, immediately after the war. The plan consisted of building settlements and military bases, in order to secure strategic control over the territories, without annexing the areas where the Palestinian population is concentrated " villages, towns, etc. " but with a view to returning them back to the control of some collaborationist Arab authority. At the beginning the plan was to give those areas back to the Jordanian monarchy. In the 1990s, Israel decided to make a deal with the PLO, because the PLO's dominant faction became willing to make a deal with them under their conditions and this yielded the Oslo agreement. For Israel, the Oslo agreement was but a step in the same direction of the Allon Plan. Arafat thought that the PLO could get some kind of independent state. But he quickly understood that he had become a victim of his own illusions. And this whole process, the so-called peace process, collapsed as we see now. It is in shambles, and whatever Washington tries to do leads to a dead end. I am not talking here about relations with Hamas, but of the so-called Palestinian authority of Mahmoud Abbas. There seems to be no possibility of reaching an agreement even though Abbas is the most servile towards Washington of all the leaders that the Palestinians ever had. Nevertheless the Israelis are not granting him any meaningful concessions. It is a complete dead end and a major failure for the United States, for the Bush administration, one of its many failures in the Middle East. The Bush team will leave the scene at the end of this year with the worst foreign policy balance sheet in history of any US administration, especially in relation to the Middle East.

Edward Said once said about the PLO elite that "No other liberation group in history has sold itself to its enemies like this." Do you think that this judgment is valid?

This is a judgment which needs to be confronted with a detailed survey of all liberation movements. I am not sure that there were no comparable cases of capitulation in the long history of anti-colonial struggles. But to be sure, although not necessarily the most, it is one of the most submissive leaderships in the history of national struggles. They accepted so many concessions, so many retreats over their own basic demands and yet they have not gotten anything substantial in return.

Are there any specific characteristics of the PLO leadership that led to these retreats?

Well, the characteristics were there from the beginning. They constitute the major difference between the PLO and

most anti-colonial and national liberation movements in history. A major specificity of the PLO is that, from the start, it has been closely linked to reactionary states, many of them closely linked to imperialism. So you had this very peculiar situation of a national movement fighting a Zionist state heavily backed by US imperialism, with this same national movement depending for its funding on states like the Saudi kingdom very closely linked to the same US imperialism. When the Palestinian guerillas took control of the PLO after the 1967 war, they were flooded with petrodollars, huge amounts. What is certain indeed is that the PLO became the richest national liberation movement in the history of anti-colonial struggles. Its budget could be compared to that of some third world countries. It developed a huge bureaucracy, a very corrupt one. With time, the best elements, the most dedicated militants were killed, especially in Jordan in 1970, during Black September. So there was some kind of selection whereby those who remained in control were the most corrupt leaders of the Palestinians. There is a direct line between this evolution and Oslo and the Palestinian Authority of today with Mahmoud Abbas, Mohammed Dahlan, and all these corrupt leaders who bet everything on Washington. They hope that the US will deliver something to them. And their problem is that, despite the fact that they are totally subservient to Washington, they are not getting anything.

What about the Palestinian left? What explains its weakness?

Well, the Palestinian left has never really managed to build itself as an actual alternative to the rightwing PLO leadership. It has never really challenged the institutions of the PLO, the structure of these institutions. It accepted the rules of the game set by the Fatah leadership, the rightwing PLO leadership. Although time and again they had disputes with the Fatah leadership and there were instances when the PLO was almost split, they would invariably reconcile in the name of national unity. This is how they lost credibility as an alternative leadership to the PLO and that is how Hamas came into the picture. In the first months after December 1987, when the first Intifada started, the Palestinian left was clearly dominant within the leadership of the Intifada along with radical members of Fatah in the occupied territories "where there could be no equivalent of the corrupt bureaucracy in exile.

Nevertheless, from the summer of 1988, they managed to capitulate to the rightwing leadership abroad, which controlled the Palestinian National Council meeting of October 1988 that proclaimed the so-called independent state, and prepared for direct negotiations with Washington. Those were the years, 1987-1988, when Hamas was founded and entered the fray. Very quickly, Hamas with its radical Islamic fundamentalist outlook became in the eyes of the Palestinian people the sole real alternative to the Fatah leadership, to the PLO. Hamas built itself as such, while the left failed miserably to project itself as an alternative. Thus Hamas became much stronger than the left, although at the start that was not the case; the fundamentalists were not stronger than the left "even in Gaza.

There is a debate on the left as to whether we should be urging a "two-state" or a "one-state" solution for Israel-Palestine. What is your view of these alternatives?

To be frank, I consider this debate to be largely a waste of time. I mean this is a debate on utopias in both cases and yet, some are conducting it as if the stakes were at hand. Each side accuses the other of being utopian, and they are both right, because both "solutions" are utopian. Of course, an "independent Palestinian state" that would be limited to the West Bank and Gaza is totally utopian. But I would also say that a single state with ten million Palestinians and six million Jews is much more of a utopia, since it requires the destruction of the Zionist state if one wants to look at the issue seriously. Otherwise it cannot work.

That is why I think that these are utopias and too much energy is focused on this debate, such that it becomes a waste of time. In my view there are two levels to be considered when facing the Palestinian issue. On the one hand are the immediate and urgent interests or needs of the Palestinian people. What are the Palestinian people in Gaza and the West Bank fighting for? They are fighting to get rid of the occupation, of course "not for the right of voting in Israel. They want sovereignty over their territories. Their fight should obviously be supported. Even if you are a one-state solution proponent, can you say: I oppose the Palestinian fight against the occupation of the West Bank

and Gaza because it doesn't correspond to my maximalist view of the correct solution? That would be completely absurd from a political standpoint.

Hence, if we put it in concrete terms, one has to support the actual struggle of the Palestinians for their immediate relief from the occupation. Now, on the other hand, if you are considering a long term solution to the question, I mean if one wants to elaborate a long term program with a utopian dimension, then why limit it to Palestine, whether with one or two states? Why leave Jordan out of the equation, for instance? There are more Palestinians in Jordan than in the West Bank and they are actually a majority in Jordan itself, east of the Jordan River. So why should Jordan be left out? Between 1949 and 1967 the West Bank and Jordan were one state in which the overwhelming majority was Palestinian. It was controlled by the monarchy and, of course, it was a despotic state.

The Palestinian leadership, when the Palestinian guerillas were a state within the state in Jordan, never fought for the overthrow of the Jordanian monarchy. Only the left, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was calling for the overthrow of the monarchy. Fatah countered the left in this regard and that was one of the factors that allowed the monarchy to crush the Palestinian movement in Jordan in 1970. The Palestinian armed forces were then completely wiped out in Jordan in 1971. Of course, the Palestinian people, mostly 1948 refugees, remained in the country, but the movement was crushed and had to go underground. This was always the rightwing perspective: We don't touch Arab regimes, we just fight against Israel.

This is the "principal contradiction" and we should cool down "secondary contradictions." Well, this is tragically absurd: the so-called "secondary contradiction" — the Jordanian monarchy, that is — killed more Palestinians than Israel up to 1971. It proved to be another side of the same coin with Israel. The population of the West Bank cannot constitute alone any kind of independent state — at best a "Bantustan." But if we think of the Jordanian territories as the natural complement to the West Bank then the picture changes. But for that, you need to get in Jordan a democratic government. Beyond that I would say that no long term, final, lasting and just solution can be conceived other than at a regional level and under socialist conditions — through a socialist federation of the Middle East and beyond. Of course, this is a utopia, but this is an inspiring utopia. As I say all the time, if you want to be utopian, go for an inspiring utopia, not a mean one. Go for the big one. The big one is transcending borders, transcending nationalisms, socialism. This is an interesting utopia, whereas a one-state, "one person one vote" solution limited to Palestinians and Israelis strikes me as an uninspiring utopia. I'm not convinced at all that the Palestinians would like to be citizens of the same state with the Israelis, even if they were the political majority under hugely unequal social conditions like what you have now in South Africa where whites still constitute by far the main section of the dominant class and are getting richer, many of them living in gated communities. And I am positively sure that the Israelis will never accept being a political minority. So this is a dead end.

Last week there were major clashes between the forces loyal to Hezbollah and the pro-western government in Lebanon. After Hezbollah repulsed the Israeli aggression against Lebanon in 2006 Hezbollah were the heroes of the day. And now things seem to have shifted once again towards greater divisions. What accounts for it?

You are right to emphasize the fact that there has been a shift. Indeed. It's true that in 2006 Hezbollah achieved a major victory and was seen in the whole Arab region and Islamic world and beyond as a kind of heroic force resisting one of the closest allies of US imperialism, repelling Zionist aggression. So yes they achieved the status of heroes. And it is true that this image has been affected by the recent clashes. Why so? Because, first of all, the enemies of Hezbollah who, of course, are at the same time the enemies of Iran at the regional level — i.e. the Saudi Kingdom, Jordan, and Egypt — had only one argument with which to counter Hezbollah and try to stop Iranian influence. This was and remains the sectarian card: denouncing Iran as a Persian Shiite power, and Hezbollah as an Arab Shiite agent of Iran, implementing a Shiite plot against Arab Sunnis. This is how they strive to present things. In 2006 this failed miserably, because populations in the region — Turkey included, I am sure — are very much against Israel and US imperialism and sympathized therefore with Hezbollah. Thus, the overwhelming majority did not buy into the

Shiite-Sunni argument.

Now what happened since then is that Hezbollah got entangled in Lebanese politics on a sectarian basis, with allies fully adhering to the sectarian framework. Like for example the Shiite Amal movement, which is a purely sectarian organization – nothing of an anti-imperialist organization, just a sectarian force. Amal in the 1980s was actually more anti-Palestinian than anything else. So Hezbollah got entangled in Lebanese sectarian politics, to the point of leading recently a military assault with its sectarian allies on Sunni-populated areas of Beirut and beyond. This affected very much its image in Lebanon – more in Lebanon than elsewhere because the Lebanese population is naturally more focused on the internal political situation in Lebanon than the people of, say, Egypt or Turkey. I believe that Hezbollah overreacted in the recent fighting.

They were right to reject the decisions of the Siniora government, for sure, but they could have defeated them easily – as they did with previous decisions they didn't like – without launching such a military offensive in Beirut and other parts of Lebanon, with allies like Amal. In so doing, they created a situation of very high sectarian resentment. Hence, although militarily they won very easily in the last round, I think they lost politically.

This is because there is now a very intense sectarian polarization in Lebanon: Sunnis versus Shiites. This is very dangerous. Now, as we can see from the discussions that are taking place in Qatar between Lebanese parties, the issue of Hezbollah's armament has been put on the table. Before the last events the parliamentary majority headed by Hariri hardly dared to raise this issue, especially after Hezbollah made a powerful case in 2006 that its armament was needed to repel and deter Israeli aggression. Now suddenly after they used their weapons in internal fighting for the first time in many years, their armed force is denounced by their opponents as a sectarian militia force. In my view Hezbollah made a big mistake whose consequences are very serious, with Lebanon entering into what looks like a new cycle of violence. It might very well appear a few years from now that what happened recently was just the first round of a new Lebanon civil war, unless regional and international conditions prevent this pessimistic scenario. Of course, this is terribly bad for the anti-imperialist struggle in the region, coming after the horrible bloodbath between Sunnis and Shiites that is continuing in Iraq. If this were to extend to Lebanon and maybe tomorrow to Syria, it would be a disaster for the whole region. The only ones who would benefit from that are Israel and the United States, both of which would try to exploit this situation.

Are the Communist Party of Lebanon or other secular Left forces putting forward demands to completely change the system so that it is no longer based on sectarian identification and parties?

Well, the Communist Party is presently the only significant force on the left in Lebanon. The rest are very small groups. Among Lebanese parties of some significance the CP is one of the very few that is really secular, dedicated to a secular program. It is a truly multi-sectarian party, with Muslims, both Shiites and Sunnis, Christians, Druze, etc. The general secretary of the party is from a Sunni background, while the majority of party members are Shiites – a real multi-sectarian party indeed. It stands for the secularization of Lebanese politics. And as a left party it raises social and economic demands. The LCP has not joined directly any of the two main camps in Lebanon.

During the recent clashes it decided not to take part in the fight. Of course the communists stand against the government and the imperialist project in Lebanon, as well as against Israel's aggressions: they joined the fight against Israeli forces in 2006. But they cannot share the goals of the opposition in domestic politics, which they denounce as bourgeois sectarian goals. They criticize both sides, putting more emphasis on the pro-Western forces led by Hariri. They stood consistently on an independent position in the last three years. This is a major improvement in their political line, because the Communist Party in the 1970s and the 1980s and the whole previous period was very much involved in alliances under bourgeois hegemony: with Arafat for some time, with the Druze's feudal leader, Jumblatt, most of the time, as well as with the Syrian regime. They went into deep crisis and fragmentation beginning

in the 1990s, as a result of which the present party, much weakened it is true, radically improved its politics. Since 2005 they have really followed an independent line, starting from the March 2005 mobilizations in favor and against Syria in Lebanon after the assassination of former Prime Minister Hariri.

On the 8th of March 2005 Hezbollah and its allies organized a huge demonstration in tribute to Syria and its president Bashar al-Assad. The pro-Western forces called for a counter-demonstration on the 14th of March 2005 against Syria, which is why the present majority in Lebanon is called "14th March" and the opposition is called by some "8th March." The Communist Party refused to join any of these two demonstrations and called for a third one. It was, of course, much smaller than the two gigantic demonstrations on 8th and 14th March, which gathered hundreds of thousand people at each of them. The demonstration organized by the LCP drew only a few thousand people. But, with their red flags, they represented visually a third way in Lebanon, rejecting the two other sectarian camps. For that reason basically I think their political attitude has very much improved, although I still have many reservations especially on their supportive attitude toward the Lebanese army and its chief poised to be elected president with the support of all forces.

It seems that the only way to go beyond sectarian divides can be through left political and trade union organizations that pose a non-sectarian alternative and resist the neoliberal policies that have been implemented in the country. Does Hezbollah have an inclination to organize resistance against those neoliberal policies?

This is a total illusion. They have nothing fundamentally against neoliberalism and, even less so, capitalism. You know that their supreme model is the Iranian regime – certainly not a bulwark against neoliberalism. Of course, like any Islamic fundamentalists, they consider that the state and/or the religious institutions should help the poor. This is charity. Most religions advocate and organize charity. It presupposes social inequalities with the rich giving the poor their breadcrumbs. The left on the other hand is egalitarian, not "charitable." In any event, Hezbollah is not really interested in the social and economic policies of the state. During all the years when Rafik Hariri dominated the government and Syrian troops dominated Lebanon, the cruelest neoliberal policies were implemented, yet Hezbollah never seriously opposed them. This is not part of their program or their priorities.

The last round of events started on the day of a general strike called by some unions. But these are rotten unions that were actually controlled by the Syrians before they left Lebanon. The previous time they called for a strike, it was a total failure because the opposition, i.e. basically Hezbollah, did not seriously support it despite paying lip service to the strike as an opposition gesture. This time, Hezbollah used the opportunity of the strike to mobilize against the political decisions by the government directed against them – not to oppose its social and economic policies. That's why, although the clashes started on the day of the general strike, the social and economic demands of the strike fell into oblivion. Hezbollah is not fighting against neoliberalism, although it can cater to the needs of its plebeian constituency at times. The only significant force that opposes neoliberalism in Lebanon is the left, mainly the LCP.

Turning to Iraq now, what is the meaning of the recent conflict between the forces loyal to the Maliki government and the Mahdi Army of Muqtada al-Sadr?

Well, they result from a convergence of two interests. The most immediate reason behind the last clashes is that the clout of the Mahdi army and the Sadrist movement in Iraq has been rising very much among Shiites in the last period, especially since 2006. They became the most popular force among Iraqi Shiites. Since we are getting close to the next elections which are provincial elections scheduled for this autumn, the other two major Shiite groups – the Maliki group (i.e. the Dawa Party) and the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC) – which are collaborating with the US occupation, feared very much the outcome of the forthcoming elections. As you know, the Sadrists had initially formed with these groups the United Iraqi Alliance and joined together with them in the previous electoral rounds. They then broke with the alliance, accusing the others of being collaborators with the occupation. Dawa and SIIC

understood that if nothing changed they were going to be beaten by the Sadrists.

This was their first and main incentive in launching the attack on Basra followed by the attack on Sadr City in Baghdad. They tried to marginalize or weaken the Sadrists. On the other hand, of course, the US occupation basically considers the Sadrists as enemies and would be hugely glad if they were weakened. US occupation forces clashed with the Sadrists more than once. In the recent clashes, US commanders tried to play a hypocritical game, claiming at the beginning that they were not involved and that the Sadrists have been no problem for US forces ever since they froze their military activities. However, it is very clear that the US was very much involved in the fighting against the Sadrists. As I said, two agendas converged: that of the US occupation and that of the Dawa-SIIC alliance anxious to weaken their main competitor among Iraqi Shiites, i.e. the Sadrists.

What are the results of the US "surge"? Certainly there has been a relative decline in the sectarian violence in Iraq. Does this mean that the US occupation is going better?

The "surge" achieved some results, to be sure. From Washington's point of view, it is successful. They claim so because as a whole the level of sectarian violence clearly subsided – a good thing indeed. But it is worth asking why did that happen? Well, because, on the one hand, more US troops were deployed in Baghdad and the Sadrists retreated and decided not to fight when the "surge" began. But the key element in the so-called surge is a change in the strategy of the occupation. The US started doing what all colonial powers did in these parts of the world, what the British did in Iraq after the First World War when they took control of the country: They played the tribal card. So the US sought to buy – literally to buy or bribe – Sunni tribes in the Sunni areas. They bribed tribes and gave them weapons assisting them in forming the so-called Awakening Councils, which are tribal forces subsidized by Washington.

They pay members of these tribal militias salaries starting at US \$300 per month. This is a high amount compared to average wages in Iraq, but not much compared to the cost of the occupation. You can make the calculation. If you give, say, up to 250,000 people an average of \$400 a month, you get \$100 million: This is peanuts compared to the \$12 billion a month that the US spends for the occupation of Iraq! And I haven't checked yet, but it might very well be the case that the tribes are being bribed with Iraqi governmental funds. Whatever the case, Washington can afford this comfortably. Is this a long term solution for the US, however? In the long term this will be another major factor in preventing Iraq from reaching any kind of stability, since it is just reinforcing the division of the country into tribes and sects. Paradoxically, Shiite forces in the government are attacking the Shiite forces of Muqtada al-Sadr under the pretext of dismantling all militias. And the Sadrists reply: "You want us to disarm, while now the Sunnis have their own militias." So this is a completely messy situation. The United States, in trying to extricate itself from the quagmire and the disaster that it created in Iraq, is just setting the scene for a much greater disaster. Iraq is a tragic story and one can hardly conceive of any stable outcome in the foreseeable future for this country as long as the US is presiding over its destiny.

Do you think that a possible victory of Obama or Clinton will change US policies regarding the Middle East and especially Iraq? Is a withdrawal from Iraq possible?

I think that the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq is something that will not happen unless it is forced upon Washington. The US will not withdraw from Iraq willingly, simply because this is not Vietnam. In Vietnam they decided to withdraw in 1973 when in the balance they saw that the cost of the war – politically, economically, from all points of view – had become much higher than the benefits for the US in controlling South Vietnam. But in Iraq, the benefits of keeping the country under control are huge.

This is the big difference between Iraq and Vietnam. Iraq is an extremely important oil country in the middle of what is

by far the most important oil region of the world. Therefore what is at stake is very much more important than Vietnam. That is why US imperialism cannot contemplate a withdrawal similar to that from Vietnam. What they will try to do is to find solutions whereby they can keep control of the country while trying to stabilize it. Because, after all, if you control a country very rich in oil but cannot exploit its oil, then what's the use? They need therefore to stabilize the country.

I think that the next administration, whoever they are, will on the one hand continue the present strategies of the Bush administration of "Iraqization" through the Sunni tribes and all that "€" like you had "Vietnamization" in Vietnam. Secondly, they will try to cut a deal with Iran as well as Syria. They certainly will try to make a deal with Syria and will try to separate it from Iran. But they need also to cut a deal with Iran in order to stabilize the area for want of better, i.e. "regime change." This was one of the key recommendations of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group co-chaired by Baker and Hamilton that was formed before the "surge" to assess the situation in Iraq: Negotiate with Tehran and Damascus.

Another important issue, which is also related to Turkish policy, is the autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq. What is the US strategy regarding the Kurds?

This is a major dilemma for the US. Everybody should remember Washington's betrayal of the Kurds after the first war against Iraq in 1991, when they rebelled against Saddam Hussein and the US just let him crush their rebellion. In the same way the US allowed Saddam Hussein to crush the rebellion in the South of Iraq. In both cases tens of thousands of people were killed. After that, in the Kurdish North the US established a kind of protectorate, a US-British protectorate in Iraqi Kurdistan. That was, on the one hand, because Turkey got alarmed about the flow of Kurdish refugees from Iraq into Turkish territory and wanted to push them back into Iraqi Kurdistan. The Europeans also got afraid that ultimately Iraqi Kurds would arrive as asylum seekers in Europe. Western powers also wanted to show that they were great humanitarians by protecting this population that had even suffered chemical attacks from Saddam Hussein.

Thus, Iraqi Kurdistan's leaders became Washington's closest allies in Iraq. When the occupation of the whole of Iraq started in 2003 this alliance proved to be very useful for Washington. The Talabani-Barzani Kurdish Alliance in Iraq is the most important and most reliable ally of the US. Basically there are no reliable allies of the US in Iraq but the Kurds. Someone like Iyad Allawi may be a trusted ally but he does not command a significant force as the Kurds do. The Shiite major forces are not reliable allies for Washington because everybody knows that they are also closely linked to Tehran, especially SIIC. They are at best ambiguous forces collaborating with the occupation but not utterly reliable. So the only reliable ally of the US is indeed the Kurdish leadership. The problem for Washington, however, is that the Kurds also have their own ambitions.

They want to establish a de facto independent state, not an officially independent state because they know that this will require a war with Turkey and they cannot afford that. They want all the attributes of an independent state without the name. They want also to enlarge the region they control to include places like Kirkuk. They want a greater Iraqi Kurdistan. This of course clashes with the aspirations of other Iraqis. And so the US is facing a real dilemma: Washington needs these Kurdish allies but at the same time it cannot lose Iraq's Arabs for the sake of its Kurds. The problem has been postponed year after year. The issue of Kirkuk should have been solved long ago according to initial plans. A referendum was supposed to be organized and it has been postponed over and over again. This is a real time bomb for Iraq.

Do you think a separation of Iraq into Kurdish, Sunni, and Shiite regions or states is possible?

"The U.S. is sowing the seeds of a long term tragedy..."

This so-called solution actually means war. Any attempt to divide the country will lead to war under present conditions. This will create a situation in the region even worse for the US. This is why Washington is not at all interested in fostering partition although there are some people in the US and in the US Congress in favor of a partition, for something like a loose federation. But even a federation is very difficult to implement. It might become possible only if you had something like equally rich oil reserves or gas reserves in all three key regions of Iraq. The Kurds are trying to secure their own. In the Sunni Arab region, there is a major gas field which is now being intensively explored as a political priority because there is a need to satisfy the Sunnis.

If each region could be endowed with important hydrocarbon resources, there might be some kind of a federation in Iraq at the end of the day, with the US remaining there as the arbiter between the three regions, Kurdish, Arab Sunni, and Arab Shiite. This might be an optimal solution for Washington, but it would be very difficult to work out – I mean to reach a real agreement, a consensus among all major factions. It is not by arming everyone like the US is doing now; it is not by enhancing tribal and sectarian divisions that this could be reached. The US is sowing the seeds of a long term tragedy in Iraq. It is already a huge tragedy. Iraq has been living a permanent tragedy since Saddam Hussein and his cronies came to power in 1968, up to the US-imposed genocidal embargo. The tragedy that Iraqis are experiencing since the beginning of the occupation in 2003 is seen by some as worse still. And I can hardly see a way out of it in the foreseeable future.

Do you believe that the anti-war movement is declining as a social force? If so, what are the causes of that decline?

Well, the movement declined very much relatively to the mobilizations held just before the invasion of Iraq. There are basic and episodic reasons of that. One episodic reason which concerns mostly the US but affects also the rest of the world is US elections and the belief of many that these could lead to a radical change in US policy towards Iraq. As usual the effect of elections is to demobilize the anti-war movement. Another episodic reason is what we were talking about, i.e. the relative success of the surge. This also has a demobilizing effect on the anti-war movement because it reduces the sense of urgency for the fight against the occupation.

To these one must add a more basic reason, which is that the nature of the forces that are facing US imperialism inspires much less sympathy than in the past. I mean in Vietnam the US was facing the Vietnamese communists who acted in very clever ways addressing the US population and the whole world. They managed to win the sympathy of world public opinion. Nowadays the forces that are facing the US are mainly Islamic fundamentalists, best epitomized by Al-Qaeda. They certainly cannot arouse any sympathy in public opinion, especially in the West where the bulk of the anti-war movement is and should be, because the anti-war movement is meaningful above all in warrior countries. So the nature of the forces that US imperialism is facing nowadays does not help the building of a strong, powerful anti-war movement.

I think that this is the chief problem confronting the anti-war movement. The main task of the anti-war, anti-imperialist movement should be to explain to public opinion that the more wars like these you have, the more fanaticism and fundamentalism you will get. And to explain that these wars will only reinforce the dialectics of barbarism that I call "the clash of barbarisms," in which the major barbarism is that of Washington and the minor one is that of fanatical bands of Islamic fundamentalists. This is a disaster for all the populations of the world. Therefore it is absolutely urgent to stop the wars and the ongoing imperialist aggression. This is the kind of message that the anti-war movement should convey and not one that says: "We support anyone who fights US imperialism notwithstanding what they are and what else they do." This is not the way to win popular support for the anti-war cause.

There is a certain dilemma for the anti-war, anti-imperialist left, because in many countries of the region resistance to imperialist aggression is headed by political Islam. How can the left show solidarity with such resistance without abandoning its struggle for secularization, women's liberation and workers' rights?

"The U.S. is sowing the seeds of a long term tragedy..."

I don't think that you can have a general rule here. It depends on which situation you are talking about. For instance in Iraq you have groups that are fighting the US occupation but the same groups are simultaneously involved in sectarian violence. And these groups have killed many more civilians on sectarian grounds than coalition troops. In such circumstances, to say "We support the Iraqi resistance" is completely wrong and misleading. You cannot say that you support such forces. One should say "We support the fight against occupation" or better, for didactic purposes: "The fight against the occupation is legitimate, by all means (truly) necessary." That's fine. You support the acts selectively, not the actors when you cannot take responsibility for all their acts. In Iraq, you cannot support any specific force because all forces that are fighting the occupation are at the same time sectarian forces. So two wars are being waged at the same time: a just war and a very reactionary one. Now take the case of Lebanon or Palestine, that is the case of Hezbollah and Hamas.

There you have Islamic fundamentalist forces opposing Israeli aggression. One can say: "We support the people's struggle against imperialist aggression regardless of the nature of the leadership; we support the struggle despite our reservations about its leadership." Moreover, I am very much against any uncritical support of any leadership whatsoever, even the most progressive leaderships — all the more so when they are not progressive, but adhere to reactionary ideologies. When the struggle is unambiguously legitimate, but led by non-progressive forces, one should state very clearly: "We support the struggle but we do not share the perspective of its leadership."