

# Political Islam in the service of imperialism

by Samir Amin

All the currents that claim adherence to political Islam proclaim the “specificity of Islam.” According to them, Islam knows nothing of the separation between politics and religion, something supposedly distinctive of Christianity. It would accomplish nothing to remind them, as I have done, that their remarks reproduce, almost word for word, what European reactionaries at the beginning of the nineteenth century (such as Bonald and de Maistre) said to condemn the rupture that the Enlightenment and the French Revolution had produced in the history of the Christian West!

On the basis of this position, every current of political Islam chooses to conduct its struggle on the terrain of culture—but “culture” reduced in actual fact to the conventional affirmation of belonging to a particular religion. In reality, the militants of political Islam are not truly interested in discussing the dogmas that form religion. The ritual assertion of membership in the community is their exclusive preoccupation. Such a vision of the reality of the modern world is not only distressing because of the immense emptiness of thought that it conceals but it also justifies imperialism’s strategy of substituting a so-called conflict of cultures for the one between imperialist centres and dominated peripheries.

The exclusive emphasis on culture allows political Islam to eliminate from every sphere of life the real social confrontations between the popular classes and the globalised capitalist system that oppresses and exploits them. The militants of political Islam have no real presence in the areas where actual social conflicts take place and their leaders repeat incessantly that such conflicts are unimportant. Islamists are only present in these areas to open schools and health clinics. But these are nothing but works of charity and means for indoctrination. They are not means of support for the struggles of the popular classes against the system responsible for their poverty.

On the terrain of the realsocial issues, political Islam aligns itself with the camp of dependent capitalism and dominant imperialism. It defends the principle of the sacred character of property and legitimises inequality and all the requirements of capitalist reproduction. The support by the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian parliament for the recent reactionary laws that reinforce the rights of property-owners to the detriment of the rights of tenant farmers (the majority of the small peasantry) is but one example among hundreds of others. There is no example of even one reactionary law promoted in any Muslim state to which the Islamist movements are opposed. Moreover, such laws are promulgated with the agreement of the leaders of the imperialist system.

Political Islam is not anti-imperialist, even if its militants think otherwise! It is an invaluable ally for imperialism and the latter knows it. It is easy to understand,

then, that political Islam has always counted in its ranks the ruling classes of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Moreover, these classes were among its most active promoters from the very beginning. The local comprador bourgeoisies, the *nouveaux riches*, beneficiaries of current imperialist globalisation, generously support political Islam. The latter has renounced an anti-imperialist perspective and substituted for it an “anti-Western” (almost “anti-Christian”) position, which obviously only leads the societies concerned into an impasse and hence does not form an obstacle to the deployment of imperialist control over the world system.

Political Islam is not only reactionary on certain questions (notably concerning the status of women) and perhaps even responsible for fanatic excesses directed against non-Muslim citizens (such as the Copts in Egypt)—it is fundamentally reactionary and therefore obviously cannot participate in the progress of peoples’ liberation.

Three major arguments are nevertheless advanced to encourage social movements as a whole to enter into dialogue with the movements of political Islam. The first is that political Islam mobilises numerous popular masses, which cannot be ignored or scorned. Numerous images certainly reinforce this claim. Still, one should keep a cool head and properly assess the mobilisations in question. The electoral “successes” that have been organised are put into perspective as soon as they are subjected to more rigorous analyses. I mention here, for example, the huge proportion of abstentions—more than 75 per cent!—in the Egyptian elections. The power of the Islamist street is, in large part, simply the reverse side of the weaknesses of the organised left, which is absent from the spheres in which current social conflicts are occurring.

Even if it were agreed that political Islam actually mobilises significant numbers, does that justify concluding that the left must seek to include political Islamic organisations in alliances for political or social action? If political Islam successfully mobilises large numbers of people, that is simply a fact, and any effective political strategy must include this fact in its considerations, proposals, and options. But seeking alliances is not necessarily the best means to deal with this challenge. It should be pointed out that the organisations of political Islam—the Muslim Brotherhood in particular—are not seeking such an alliance, indeed even reject it. If, by chance, some unfortunate leftist organisations come to believe that political Islamic organisations have accepted them, the first decision the latter would make, after having succeeded in coming to power, would be to liquidate their burdensome ally with extreme violence, as was the case in Iran with the Mujahideen and the Fidayeen Khalq.

The second reason put forward by the partisans of “dialogue” is that political Islam, even if it is reactionary in terms of social proposals, is “anti-imperialist.” I have heard it said that the criterion for this that I propose (unreserved support for struggles carried out for social progress) is “economistic” and neglects the

political dimensions of the challenge that confronts the peoples of the South. I do not believe that this critique is valid given what I have said about the democratic and national dimensions of the desirable responses for handling this challenge.

I also agree that in their response to the challenge that confronts the peoples of the South, the forces in action are not necessarily consistent in their manner of dealing with its social and political dimensions. It is, thus, possible to imagine a political Islam that is anti-imperialist, though regressive on the social plane. Iran, Hamas in Palestine, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and certain resistance movements in Iraq immediately come to mind. I will discuss these particular situations later. What I contend is that political Islam as a whole is quite simply not anti-imperialist but is altogether lined up behind the dominant powers on the world scale.

The third argument calls the attention of the left to the necessity of combating Islamophobia. Any left worthy of the name cannot ignore the *question des banlieues*, that is, the treatment of the popular classes of immigrant origin in the metropolises of contemporary developed capitalism. Analysis of this challenge and the responses provided by various groups (the interested parties themselves, the European electoral left, the radical left) lies outside the focus of this text.

I will content myself with expressing my viewpoint in principle: the progressive response cannot be based on the institutionalisation of communitarianism,\* which is essentially and necessarily always associated with inequality, and ultimately originates in a racist culture. A specific ideological product of the reactionary political culture of the United States, communitarianism (already triumphant in Great Britain) is beginning to pollute political life on the European continent. Islamophobia, systematically promoted by important sections of the political elite and the media, is part of a strategy for managing community diversity for capital's benefit, because this supposed respect for diversity is, in fact, only the means to deepen divisions within the popular classes.

The question of the so-called problem neighbourhoods (*banlieues*) is specific and confusing it with the question of imperialism (i.e. the imperialist management of the relations between the dominant imperialist centres and the dominated peripheries), as is sometimes done, will contribute nothing to making progress on each of these completely distinct terrains. This confusion is part of the reactionary toolbox and reinforces Islamophobia, which, in turn, makes it possible to legitimise both the offensive against the popular classes in the imperialist centres and the offensive against the peoples of the peripheries concerned. This confusion and Islamophobia, in turn, provide a valuable service to reactionary political Islam, giving credibility to its anti-Western discourse. I say, then, that the

\*A political theory based on "collective cultural identities" as central to understanding dynamic social reality.—Ed.

two reactionary ideological campaigns promoted, respectively, by the racist right in the West and by political Islam mutually support each other, just as they support communitarian practices.

### **Modernity, democracy, secularism, and Islam**

The image that the Arab and Islamic regions give of themselves today is that of societies in which religion (Islam) is at the forefront in all areas of social and political life, to the point that it appears strange to imagine that it could be different. The majority of foreign observers (political leaders and the media) conclude that modernity, perhaps even democracy, will have to adapt to the strong presence of Islam, *de facto* precluding secularism. Either this reconciliation is possible and it will be necessary to support it, or it is not and it will be necessary to deal with this region of the world as it is. I do not at all share this so-called realist vision. The future—in the long view of a globalised socialism—is, for the peoples of this region as for others, democracy and secularism. This future is possible in these regions as elsewhere, but nothing is guaranteed and certain, anywhere.

Modernity is a rupture in world history, initiated in Europe during the sixteenth century. Modernity proclaims that human beings are responsible for their own history, individually and collectively, and consequently breaks with the dominant pre-modern ideologies. Modernity, then, makes democracy possible, just as it demands secularism, in the sense of separation of the religious and the political. Formulated by the eighteenth century Enlightenment, implemented by the French Revolution, the complex association of modernity, democracy, and secularism, its advances and retreats, has been shaping the contemporary world ever since.

But modernity by itself is not only a cultural revolution. It derives its meaning only through the close relation that it has with the birth and subsequent growth of capitalism. This relation has conditioned the historic limits of “really existing” modernity. The concrete forms of modernity, democracy, and secularism found today must, then, be considered as products of the concrete history of the growth of capitalism. They are shaped by the specific conditions in which the domination of capital is expressed—the historical compromises that define the social contents of hegemonic blocs (what I call the historical course of political cultures).

This condensed presentation of my understanding of the historical materialist method is evoked here simply to situate the diverse ways of combining capitalist modernity, democracy, and secularism in their theoretical context.

The Enlightenment and the French Revolution put forward a model of radical secularism. Atheist or agnostic, deist or believer (in this case Christian), the individual is free to choose, the state knows nothing about it. On the European

continent—and in France beginning with the Restoration—the retreats and compromises which combined the power of the bourgeoisie with that of the dominant classes of the pre-modern systems were the basis for attenuated forms of secularism, understood as tolerance, without excluding the social role of the churches from the political system. As for the United States, its particular historical path resulted in the forming of a fundamentally reactionary political culture, in which genuine secularism is practically unknown. Religion here is a recognised social actor and secularism is confused with the multiplicity of official religions (any religion—or even sect—is official).

There is an obvious link between the degree of radical secularism upheld and the degree of support for shaping society in accord with the central theme of modernity. The left, be it radical or even moderate, which believes in the effectiveness of politics to orient social evolution in chosen directions, defends strong concepts of secularism. The conservative right claims that things should be allowed to evolve on their own whether the question is economic, political, or social. As to economy the choice in favour of the “market” is obviously favourable to capital. In politics low-intensity democracy becomes the rule, alternation is substituted for alternative.

And in society, in this context, politics has no need for active secularism—“communities” compensate for the deficiencies of the state. The market and representative democracy make history and they should be allowed to do so. In the current moment of the left’s retreat, this conservative version of social thought is widely dominant, in formulations that run the gamut from those of Touraine to those of Negri. The reactionary political culture of the United States goes even further in negating the responsibility of political action. The repeated assertion that God inspires the “American” nation, and the massive adherence to this “belief,” reduce the very concept of secularism to nothing. To say that God makes history is, in fact, to allow the market alone to do it.

From this point of view, where are the peoples of the Middle East region situated? The image of bearded men bowed low and groups of veiled women give rise to hasty conclusions about the intensity of religious adherence among individuals. Western “culturalist” friends who call for respect for the diversity of beliefs rarely find out about the procedures implemented by the authorities to present an image that is convenient for them. There are certainly those who are “crazy for God” (*fous de Dieu*). Are they proportionally more numerous than the Spanish Catholics who march on Easter? Or the vast crowds who listen to televangelists in the United States?

In any case, the region has not always projected this image of itself. Beyond the differences from country to country, a large region can be identified that runs from Morocco to Afghanistan, including all the Arab peoples (with the exception of those in the Arabian peninsula), the Turks, Iranians, Afghans, and peoples of

the former Soviet Central Asian republics, in which the possibilities for the development of secularism are far from negligible. The situation is different among other neighbouring peoples, the Arabs of the peninsula or the Pakistanis.

In this larger region, political traditions have been strongly marked by the radical currents of modernity: the ideas of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and the communism of the Third International were present in the minds of everyone and were much more important than the parliamentarianism of Westminster, for example. These dominant currents inspired the major models for political transformation implemented by the ruling classes, which could be described, in some of their aspects, as forms of enlightened despotism.

This was certainly the case in the Egypt of Mohammed Ali or Khedive Ismail. Kemalism in Turkey and modernisation in Iran were similar. The national populism of more recent stages of history belongs to the same family of modernist political projects. The variants of the model were numerous (the Algerian National Liberation Front, Tunisian Bourguibism, Egyptian Nasserism, the Ba'athism of Syria and Iraq), but the direction of movement was analogous. Apparently extreme experiences—the so-called communist regimes in Afghanistan and South Yemen—were really not very different. All these regimes accomplished much and, for this reason, had very wide popular support.

This is why, even though they were not truly democratic, they opened the way to a possible development in this direction. In certain circumstances, such as those in Egypt from 1920 to 1950, an experiment in electoral democracy was attempted, supported by the moderate anti-imperialist centre (the Wafd party), opposed by the dominant imperialist power (Great Britain) and its local allies (the monarchy). Secularism, implemented in moderate versions, to be sure, was not “refused” by the people. On the contrary, it was religious people who were regarded as obscurantists by general public opinion, and most of them were.

The modernist experiments, from enlightened despotism to radical national populism, were not products of chance. Powerful movements that were dominant in the middle classes created them. In this way, these classes expressed their will to be viewed as fully fledged partners in modern globalisation. These projects, which can be described as national bourgeois, were modernist, secularising and potential carriers of democratic developments. But precisely because these projects conflicted with the interests of dominant imperialism, the latter fought them relentlessly and systematically mobilised declining obscurantist forces for this purpose.

The history of the Muslim Brotherhood is well known. It was literally created in the 1920s by the British and the monarchy to block the path of the democratic and secular Wafd. Their mass return from their Saudi refuge after Nasser's death, organised by the CIA and Sadat, is also well known. We are all acquainted with

the history of the Taliban, formed by the CIA in Pakistan to fight the “communists” who had opened the schools to everyone, boys and girls. It is even well known that the Israelis supported Hamas at the beginning in order to weaken the secular and democratic currents of the Palestinian resistance.

Political Islam would have had much more difficulty in moving out from the borders of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan without the continual, powerful, and resolute support of the United States. Saudi Arabian society had not even begun its move out of tradition when petroleum was discovered under its soil. The alliance between imperialism and the traditional ruling class, sealed immediately, was concluded between the two partners and gave a new lease on life to Wahabi political Islam. On their side, the British succeeded in breaking Indian unity by persuading the Muslim leaders to create their own state, trapped in political Islam at its very birth. It should be noted that the theory by which this curiosity was legitimated—attributed to Mawdudi—had been completely drawn up beforehand by the English Orientalists in His Majesty’s service.\*

It is, thus, easy to understand the initiative taken by the United States to break the united front of Asian and African states set up at Bandung (1955) by creating an “Islamic Conference,” immediately promoted (from 1957) by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Political Islam penetrated into the region by this means.

The least of the conclusions that should be drawn from the observations made here is that political Islam is not the spontaneous result of the assertion of authentic religious convictions by the peoples concerned. Political Islam was constructed by the systematic action of imperialism, supported, of course, by obscurantist reactionary forces and subservient comprador classes. That this state of affairs is also the responsibility of left forces that neither saw nor knew how to deal with the challenge remains indisputable.

### **Questions relative to the front-line countries (Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, and Iran)**

The project of the United States, supported to varying degrees by their subaltern allies in Europe and Japan, is to establish military control over the entire planet. With this prospect in mind, the Middle East was chosen as the “first strike” region for four reasons: (1) it holds the most abundant petroleum resources in the world and its direct control by the armed forces of the United States would give Washington a privileged position, placing its allies—Europe and Japan—and possible rivals (China) in an uncomfortable position of dependence for their energy supplies; (2) it is located at the crossroads of the Old World and makes it easier to put in place a permanent military threat against China, India, and Russia; (3)

\*The origin of the force of today’s political Islam in Iran does not show the same historical connection with imperialist manipulation, for reasons discussed in the next section.—Ed.

the region is experiencing a moment of weakness and confusion that allows the aggressor to be assured of an easy victory, at least for the moment; and (4) Israel's presence in the region, Washington's unconditional ally.

This aggression has placed the countries and nations located on the front line (Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, and Iran) in the particular situation of being destroyed (the first three) or threatened with destruction (Iran).

## **Afghanistan**

Afghanistan experienced the best period in its modern history during the so-called communist republic. This was a regime of modernist enlightened despotism that opened up the educational system to children of both sexes. It was an enemy of obscurantism and, for this reason, had decisive support within the society. The agrarian reform that it had undertaken was, for the most part, a group of measures intended to reduce the tyrannical powers of tribal leaders. The support—at least tacitly—of the majority of the peasantry guaranteed the probable success of this well-begun change. The propaganda conveyed by the Western media as well as by political Islam presented this experiment as communist and atheist totalitarianism rejected by the Afghan people. In reality, the regime was far from being unpopular, much like Atatürk in his time.

The fact that the leaders of this experiment, in both of the major factions (Khalq and Parcham), were self-described as communists is not surprising. The model of the progress accomplished by the neighbouring peoples of Soviet Central Asia (despite everything that has been said on the subject and despite the autocratic practices of the system) in comparison with the ongoing social disasters of British imperialist management in other neighbouring countries (India and Pakistan included) had the effect, here as in many other countries of the region, of encouraging patriots to assess the full extent of the obstacle formed by imperialism to any attempt at modernisation. The invitation extended by one faction to the Soviets to intervene in order to rid themselves of the others certainly had a negative effect and mortgaged the possibilities of the modernist national populist project.

The United States in particular and its allies of the Triad in general have always been tenacious opponents of the Afghan modernisers, communists or not. It is they who mobilised the obscurantist forces of Pakistan-style political Islam (the Taliban) and the warlords (the tribal leaders successfully neutralised by the so-called communist regime), and they who trained and armed them. Even after the Soviet retreat, the Najibullah government demonstrated the capability for resistance. It probably would have gained the upper hand but for the Pakistani military offensive that came to the support of the Taliban, and then the offensive

of the reconstituted forces of the warlords, which increased the chaos.

Afghanistan was devastated by the intervention of the United States and its allies and agents, the Islamists in particular. Afghanistan cannot be reconstructed under their authority, barely disguised behind a clown without roots in the country, who was parachuted there by the Texas transnational by whom he was employed. The supposed “democracy,” in the name of which Washington, NATO, and the UN, called to the rescue, claim to justify the continuation of their presence (in fact, occupation), was a lie from the very beginning and has become a huge farce.

There is only one solution to the Afghan problem: all foreign forces should leave the country and all powers should be forced to refrain from financing and arming their allies. To those who are well intentioned and express their fear that the Afghan people will then tolerate the dictatorship of the Taliban (or the warlords), I would respond that the foreign presence has been up until now and remains the best support for this dictatorship! The Afghan people had been moving in another direction—potentially the best possible—at a time when the West was forced to take less interest in its affairs. To the enlightened despotism of “communists,” the civilised West has always preferred obscurantist despotism, infinitely less dangerous for its interests!

## **Iraq**

The armed diplomacy of the United States had the objective of literally destroying Iraq well before pretexts were actually given to it to do so on two different occasions: the invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and then after September 11, 2001—exploited for this purpose by Bush with Goebbels-style cynicism and lies (“If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it”). The reason for this objective is simple and has nothing to do with the discourse calling for the liberation of the Iraqi people from the bloody dictatorship (real enough) of Saddam Hussein. Iraq possesses a large part of the best petroleum resources of the planet.

But, what is more, Iraq had succeeded in training scientific and technical cadres that were capable, through their critical mass, of supporting a coherent and substantial national project. This danger had to be eliminated by a preventive war that the United States gave itself the right to carry out when and where it decided, without the least respect for international law.

Beyond this obvious observation, several serious questions should be examined: (1) How could Washington’s plan appear—even for a brief historical moment—to be such a dazzling success so easily? (2) What new situation has been created and confronts the Iraqi nation today? (3) What responses are the various elements of the Iraqi population giving to this challenge? and (4) What solutions can the democratic and progressive Iraqi, Arab, and international forces

promote?

Saddam Hussein's defeat was predictable. Faced with an enemy whose main advantage lies in its capability to effect genocide with impunity by aerial bombardment (the use of nuclear weapons is to come), the people have only one possible effective response: carry out resistance on their invaded territory. Saddam's regime was devoted to eliminating every means of defence within reach of its people through the systematic destruction of any organisation and every political party (beginning with the Communist Party) that had made the history of modern Iraq, including the Ba'ath itself, which had been one of the major actors in this history.

It is not surprising in these conditions that the Iraqi people allowed their country to be invaded without a struggle, nor even that some behaviour (such as apparent participation in elections organised by the invader or the outburst of fratricidal fighting among Kurds, Sunni Arabs, and Shi'a Arabs) seemed to be signs of a possible acceptance of defeat (on which Washington had based its calculations). But what is worthy of note is that the resistance on the ground grows stronger every day (despite all of the serious weaknesses displayed by the various resistance forces), that it has already made it impossible to establish a regime of lackeys capable of maintaining the appearance of order; in a way, that it has already demonstrated the failure of Washington's project.

A new situation has, nevertheless, been created by the foreign military occupation. The Iraqi nation is truly threatened. Washington is incapable of maintaining its control over the country (so as to pillage its petroleum resources, which is its number one objective) through the intermediary of a seeming national government. The only way it can continue its project, then, is to break the country apart. The division of the country into at least three states (Kurd, Sunni Arab, and Shi'a Arab) was, perhaps from the very beginning, Washington's objective, in alignment with Israel (the archives will reveal the truth of that in the future).

Today, the "civil war" is the card that Washington plays to legitimise the continuation of its occupation. Clearly, permanent occupation was—and remains—the objective: it is the only means by which Washington can guarantee its control of the petroleum resources. Certainly, no credence can be given to Washington's declarations of intent, such as "we will leave the country as soon as order has been restored." It should be remembered that the British never said of their occupation of Egypt, beginning in 1882, that it was anything other than provisional (it lasted until 1956!). Meanwhile, of course, the United States destroys the country, its schools, factories, and scientific capacities, a little more each day, using all means, including the most criminal.

The responses given by the Iraqi people to the challenge—so far, at least—do not appear to be up to facing the seriousness of the situation. That is the least that can be said. What are the reasons for this? The dominant Western media

repeat *ad nauseam* that Iraq is an artificial country and that the oppressive domination of Saddam's "Sunni" regime over the Shi'a and Kurds is the origin of the inevitable civil war (which can only be suppressed, perhaps, by continuing the foreign occupation). The resistance, then, is limited to a few pro-Saddam hard-core Islamists from the Sunni triangle. It is surely difficult to string together so many falsehoods.

Following the First World War, the British had great difficulty in defeating the resistance of the Iraqi people. In complete harmony with their imperial tradition, the British imported a monarchy and created a class of large landowners to support their power, thereby giving a privileged position to the Sunnis. But, despite their systematic efforts, the British failed. The Communist Party and the Ba'ath Party were the main organised political forces that defeated the power of the "Sunni" monarchy detested by everyone, Sunni, Shi'a, and Kurd. The violent competition between these two forces, which occupied centre stage between 1958 and 1963, ended with the victory of the Ba'ath Party, welcomed at the time by the Western powers as a relief.

The Communist project carried in itself the possibility for a democratic evolution; this was not true of the Ba'ath. The latter was nationalist and pan-Arab in principle, admired the Prussian model for constructing German unity, and recruited its members from the secular, modernist petite bourgeoisie, hostile to obscurantist expressions of religion. In power, the Ba'ath evolved, in predictable fashion, into a dictatorship that was only half anti-imperialist, in the sense that, depending on conjunctures and circumstances, a compromise could be accepted by the two partners (Ba'athist power in Iraq and US imperialism, dominant in the region).

This deal encouraged the megalomaniacal excesses of the leader, who imagined that Washington would accept making him its main ally in the region. Washington's support for Baghdad (the delivery of chemical weapons is proof of this) in the absurd and criminal war against Iran from 1980 to 1989 appeared to lend credence to this calculation. Saddam never imagined Washington's deceit, that modernisation of Iraq was unacceptable to imperialism and that the decision to destroy the country had already been made. Saddam fell into the open trap when the green light was given to annex Kuwait (in fact attached in Ottoman times to the provinces that constitute Iraq, and detached by the British imperialists in order to make it one of their petroleum colonies). Iraq was then subjected to ten years of sanctions intended to bleed the country dry so as to facilitate the glorious conquest of the resulting vacuum by the armed forces of the United States.

The successive Ba'athist regimes, including the last one in its declining phase under Saddam's leadership, can be accused of everything, except for having stirred up the conflict between the Sunni and Shi'a. Who then is responsible for

the bloody clashes between the two communities? One day, we will certainly learn how the CIA (and undoubtedly Mossad) organised many of these massacres. But, beyond that, it is true that the political desert created by the Saddam regime and the example that it provided of unprincipled opportunist methods encouraged succeeding aspirants to power of all kinds to follow this path, often protected by the occupier. Sometimes, perhaps, they were even naïve to the point of believing that they could be of service to the occupying power.

The aspirants in question, be they religious leaders (Shi'a or Sunni), supposed (para-tribal) "notables," or notoriously corrupt businessmen exported by the United States, never had any real political standing in the country. Even those religious leaders whom the believers respected had no political influence that was acceptable to the Iraqi people. Without the void created by Saddam, no one would know how to pronounce their names. Faced with the new political world created by the imperialism of liberal globalisation, will other authentically popular and national, possibly even democratic, political forces have the means to re-construct themselves?

There was a time when the Iraqi Communist Party was the focus for organising the best of what Iraqi society could produce. The Communist Party was established in every region of the country and dominated the world of intellectuals, often of Shi'a origin (I note in passing that the Shi'a produced revolutionaries or religious leaders above all, rarely bureaucrats or compradors!). The Communist Party was authentically popular and anti-imperialist, little inclined to demagoguery and potentially democratic. After the massacre of thousands of its best militants by the Ba'athist dictatorships, the collapse of the Soviet Union (for which the Iraqi Communist Party was not prepared), and the behaviour of those intellectuals who believed it acceptable to return from exile as camp followers of the armed forces of the United States, is the Iraqi Communist Party henceforth fated to disappear permanently from history? Unfortunately, this is all too possible, but not inevitable, far from it.

The Kurdish question is real, in Iraq as in Iran and Turkey. But on this subject also, it should be remembered that the Western powers have always practised, with great cynicism, double standards. The repression of Kurdish demands has never attained in Iraq and Iran the level of police, military, political, and moral violence carried out by Ankara. Neither Iran nor Iraq has ever gone so far as to deny the very existence of the Kurds. However, Turkey must be pardoned for everything as a member of NATO, an organisation of democratic nations, as the media remind us. Among the eminent democrats proclaimed by the West was Portugal's Salazar, one of NATO's founding members, and the no less ardent admirers of democracy, the Greek colonels and Turkish generals!

Each time that the Iraqi popular fronts, formed around the Communist Party and the Ba'ath in the best moments of its turbulent history, exercised political

power, they always found an area of agreement with the principal Kurdish parties. The latter, moreover, have always been their allies.

The anti-Shi'a and anti-Kurd excesses of the Saddam regime were certainly real: for example, the bombing of the Basra region by Saddam's army after its defeat in Kuwait in 1990 and the use of gas against the Kurds. These excesses came in response to the manoeuvres of Washington's armed diplomacy, which had mobilised sorcerer's apprentices among Shi'a and Kurds. They remain no less criminal excesses, and stupid, moreover, since the success of Washington's appeals was quite limited. But can anything else be expected from dictators like Saddam?

The force of the resistance to foreign occupation, unexpected under these conditions, might seem to be miraculous. This is not the case, since the basic reality is that the Iraqi people as a whole (Arab and Kurd, Sunni and Shi'a) detest the occupiers and are familiar with its crimes on a daily basis (assassinations, bombings, massacres, torture). Given this a united front of national resistance (call it what you want) might even be imagined, proclaiming itself as such, posting the names, lists of organisations, and parties composing it and their common programme.

This, however, is not actually the case up to the present for all of the reasons described above, including the destruction of the social and political fabric caused by the Saddam dictatorship and the occupation. Regardless of the reasons, this weakness is a serious handicap, which makes it easier to divide the population, encourage opportunists, even so far as making them collaborators, and throw confusion over the objectives of the liberation.

Who will succeed in overcoming these handicaps? The communists should be well placed to do so. Already, militants who are present on the ground are separating themselves from the leaders of the Communist Party (the only ones known by the dominant media) who, confused and embarrassed, are attempting to give a semblance of legitimacy to their rallying to the collaborationist government, even pretending that they are adding to the effectiveness of armed resistance by such action! But, under the circumstances, many other political forces could make decisive initiatives in the direction of forming this front.

It remains the case that, despite its weaknesses, the Iraqi people's resistance has already defeated (politically if not yet militarily) Washington's project. It is precisely this that worries the Atlanticists in the European Union, faithful allies of the United States. Today, they fear a US defeat, because this would strengthen the capacity of the peoples of the South to force globalised transnational capital of the imperialist triad to respect the interests of the nations and peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

The Iraqi resistance has offered proposals that would make it possible to get out of the impasse and aid the United States to withdraw from the trap. It

proposes: (1) formation of a transitional administrative authority set up with the support of the UN Security Council; (2) the immediate cessation of resistance actions and military and police interventions by occupying forces; (3) the departure of all foreign military and civilian authorities within six months. The details of these proposals have been published in the prestigious Arab review *Al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi* (January 2006), published in Beirut.

The absolute silence with which the European media oppose the dissemination of this message is a testament to the solidarity of the imperialist partners. Democratic and progressive European forces have the duty to dissociate themselves from this policy of the imperialist triad and support the proposals of the Iraqi resistance. To leave the Iraqi people to confront its opponent alone is not an acceptable option: it reinforces the dangerous idea that nothing can be expected from the West and its peoples, and consequently encourages the unacceptable—even criminal—excesses in the activities of some of the resistance movements.

The sooner the foreign occupation troops leave the country and the stronger the support by democratic forces in the world and in Europe for the Iraqi people, the greater will be the possibilities for a better future for this martyred people. The longer the occupation lasts, the more dismal will be the aftermath of its inevitable end.

## **Palestine**

The Palestinian people have, since the Balfour Declaration during the First World War, been the victim of a colonisation project by a foreign population, who reserve for them the fate of the “redskins,” whether one acknowledges it or pretends to be ignorant of it. This project has always had the unconditional support of the dominant imperialist power in the region (yesterday Great Britain, today the United States), because the foreign state in the region formed by that project can only be the unconditional ally, in turn, of the interventions required to force the Arab Middle East to submit to the domination of imperialist capitalism.

This is an obvious fact for all the peoples of Africa and Asia. Consequently, on both continents, they are spontaneously united on the assertion and defence of the rights of the Palestinian people. In Europe, however, the “Palestinian question” causes division, produced by the confusions kept alive by Zionist ideology, which is frequently echoed favourably

Today more than ever, in conjunction with the implementation of the US “Greater Middle East project,” the rights of the Palestinian people have been abolished. All the same, the PLO accepted the Oslo and Madrid plans and the roadmap drafted by Washington. It is Israel that has openly gone back on its agreement, and implemented an even more ambitious expansion plan. The PLO has been undermined as a result: public opinion can justly reproach it with having naively believed in the sincerity of its adversaries.

The support provided by the occupation authorities to its Islamist adversary (Hamas), in the beginning, at least, and the spread of corrupt practices in the Palestinian administration (on which the fund donors—the World Bank, Europe, and the NGOs—are silent, if they are not party to it) had to lead to the Hamas electoral victory (it was predictable). This then became an additional pretext immediately put forward to justify unconditional alignment with Israeli policies no matter what they may be.

The Zionist colonial project has always been a threat, beyond Palestine, for neighbouring Arab peoples. Its ambitions to annex the Egyptian Sinai and its effective annexation of the Syrian Golan are testimony to that. In the Greater Middle East project, a particular place is granted to Israel, to its regional monopoly of nuclear military equipment and its role as “indispensable partner” (under the fallacious pretext that Israel has technological expertise of which the Arab people are incapable. What an indispensable racism!).

It is not the intention here to offer analyses concerning the complex interactions between the resistance struggles against Zionist colonial expansion and the political conflicts and choices in Lebanon and Syria. The Ba’athist regimes in Syria have resisted, in their own way, the demands of the imperialist powers and Israel. That this resistance has also served to legitimise more questionable ambitions (control of Lebanon) is certainly not debatable. Moreover, Syria has carefully chosen the least dangerous allies in Lebanon. It is well known that the Lebanese Communist Party had organised resistance to the Israeli incursions in South Lebanon (diversion of water included).

The Syrian, Lebanese, and Iranian authorities closely cooperated to destroy this dangerous base and replace it with Hezbollah. The assassination of Rafiq al-Harriri (a still unresolved case) obviously gave the imperialist powers (the United States in front, France behind) the opportunity to intervene with two objectives in mind: (1) force Damascus to align itself permanently with the vassal Arab states (Egypt and Saudi Arabia)—or, failing that, eliminate the vestiges of a deteriorated Ba’athist power; and (2) demolish what remains of the capability to resist Israeli incursions (by demanding the disarmament of Hezbollah). Rhetoric about democracy can be invoked within this context, if useful.

Today to accept the implementation of the Israeli project in progress is to ratify the abolition of the primary right of peoples: the right to exist. This is the supreme crime against humanity. The accusation of “anti-Semitism” addressed to those who reject this crime is only a means for appalling blackmail.

## **Iran**

It is not our intention here to develop the analyses called for by the Islamic Revolution. Was it, as it has been proclaimed to be among supporters of political Islam as well as among foreign observers, the declaration of and point of departure for

a change that ultimately must seize the entire region, perhaps even the whole Muslim world, renamed for the occasion the *umma* (the “nation,” which has never been)? Or was it a singular event, particularly because it was a unique combination of the interpretations of Shi’a Islam and the expression of Iranian nationalism?

From the perspective of what interests us here, I will only make two observations. The first is that the regime of political Islam in Iran is not by nature incompatible with integration of the country into the globalised capitalist system such as it is, since the regime is based on liberal principles for managing the economy. The second is that the Iranian nation as such is a “strong nation,” one whose major components, if not all, of both popular classes and ruling classes, do not accept the integration of their country into the globalised system in a dominated position. There is, of course, a contradiction between these two dimensions of the Iranian reality. The second one accounts for Teheran’s foreign policy tendencies, which bear witness to the will to resist foreign diktats.

It is Iranian nationalism—powerful and, in my opinion, altogether historically positive—that explains the success of the modernisation of scientific, industrial, technological, and military capabilities undertaken by the Shah’s regime and the Khomeinist regime that followed. Iran is one of the few states of the South (with China, India, Korea, Brazil, and maybe a few others, but not many!) to have a national bourgeois project. Whether it be possible in the long term to achieve this project or not (my opinion is that it is not) is not the focus of our discussion here. Today this project exists and is in place.

It is precisely because Iran forms a critical mass capable of attempting to assert itself as a respected partner that the United States has decided to destroy the country by a new preventive war. As is well known, the conflict is taking place around the nuclear capabilities that Iran is developing. Why should not this country, just like others, have the right to pursue these capabilities, up to and including becoming a nuclear military power? By what right can the imperialist powers and their Israeli accomplice boast about granting themselves a monopoly over weapons of mass destruction? Can one give any credit to the discourse that argues that “democratic” nations will never make use of such weapons like “rogue states” could, when it is common knowledge that the democratic nations in question are responsible for the greatest genocides of modern times, including the one against the Jews, and that the United States has already used atomic weapons and still today rejects an absolute and general ban on their use?

## **Conclusion**

Today, political conflicts in the region find three groups of forces opposed to one another: those that proclaim their nationalist past (but are, in reality, nothing more than the degenerate and corrupt inheritors of the bureaucracies of the

national-populist era); those that proclaim political Islam; and those that are attempting to organise around “democratic” demands that are compatible with economic liberalism. The consolidation of power by any of these forces is not acceptable to a left that is attentive to the interests of the popular classes. In fact, the interests of the comprador classes affiliated with the current imperialist system are expressed through these three tendencies. US diplomacy keeps all three irons in the fire, since it is focused on using the conflicts among them for its exclusive benefit.

For the left to attempt to become involved in these conflicts solely through alliances with one or another of the tendencies\* (preferring the regimes in place to avoid the worst, i.e. political Islam, or else seeking to be allied with the latter in order to get rid of the regimes) is doomed to fail. The left must assert itself by undertaking struggles in areas where it finds its natural place: defence of the economic and social interests of the popular classes, democracy, and assertion of national sovereignty, all conceptualised together as inseparable.

The region of the Greater Middle East is today central in the conflict between the imperialist leader and the peoples of the entire world. To defeat the Washington establishment’s project is the condition for providing the possibility of success for advances in any region of the world. Failing that, all these advances will remain vulnerable in the extreme. That does not mean that the importance of struggles carried out in other regions of the world, in Europe or Latin America or elsewhere, should be underestimated. It means only that they should be part of a comprehensive perspective that contributes to defeating Washington in the region that it has chosen for its first criminal strike of this century.

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\*Tactical alliances arising from the concrete situation are another matter, e.g. the joint action of the Lebanese Communist Party with Hezbollah in resisting the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the summer of 2006.—Ed.