

Middle East: Imperial assault on and tasks for the left

Ardeshir Mehrdad interviewing Alex Callinicos

The present interview with Alex Callinicos was performed over several weeks by email spanning late July to mid September. The early questions took place at the start of the Israeli attack on Lebanon. The last five questions were answered in one go in mid September. Because of the lengthiness of the interview it was not possible to pose any further questions arising out of these answers.

Ardeshir Mehrdad: Can we start with the political context. In general terms, how would you describe the current political situation in the Middle East?

Alex Callinicos: The current situation – not only but especially in the Middle East – is defined by the imperialist offensive mounted by the United States and its closest allies (notably Israel and Britain) since 11 September 2001. Carried out under the slogan of the ‘war on terrorism’ the real aim of this offensive is to perpetuate the global domination of US capitalism (hence the title of the neocon ‘Project for the New American Century’). The Middle East – and more generally Western Asia (what Zbigniew Brzezinski calls the ‘the global Balkans’) – is the privileged site of this struggle, both because of its strategic and economic significance and because of the setbacks that the US and its allies have suffered, notably thanks to the effects of the Iranian Revolution of 1978-9 and of Israel’s disastrous 1982 Lebanon War.

This imperialist offensive suffers three main problems. First and most fundamental, it has evoked powerful resistance, above all in Iraq itself, where the US seems to be bogged down in an unwinnable counter-insurgency war. We now see Israel too beginning to face similar difficulties thanks to Hezbollah’s very effective defence against the Israel Defence Force’s assault on Lebanon. Secondly, compared to the 1991 Gulf War, the current ‘war on terrorism’ lacks international legitimacy thanks to the Bush administration’s unilateralism and its contempt for human rights (Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, Bagram ...). Some commentators, for example Giovanni Arrighi, argue that we are witnessing a broader crisis of US hegemony.¹

Thirdly, the ideological justification of the imperialist offensive – what Condoleezza Rice calls ‘the birth of a New Middle East’ with the spread of liberal democracy – is rebounding on its authors. This is partly because when given the chance to vote people seem to be backing radical Islamists such as Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. Moreover, by giving legitimacy to democratic demands the US threatens to undermine its closest Arab allies, for example, the Saudi autocracy and the Mubarak dynasty in Egypt. Finally, of course, by allowing Israel to destroy Lebanon, Washington is destroying the one clear success for its democracy agenda in the region, the so-called ‘cedar revolution’ thanks to which the US and France forced Syria to pull out of Lebanon.

AM: Before proceeding to the next question you might wish to clarify and expand on the seriousness of the three main problems that you suggest challenge the imperialist offensive. Could you, for example consider following facts: First,

¹ G. Arrighi, ‘Hegemony Unravelling’, *New Left Review*, II/32 and 33 (2005).

the existing resistance movements operating in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon appear to suffer from internal weaknesses, resulting predominantly from sectarian rivalries and factionalist tensions. Second, in recent years the Bush Administration seems to have modified its unilateralism significantly. The US has been seeking a broader international consensus over its pre-emptive strategy as witnessed, at least, in the current referral to the UN Security Council of the war on Lebanon or the Iran nuclear issue. And third, the power of corporate media to modify and dampen down the negative impact of the US Army's barbaric behaviour in the region, and to conjure up spurious ideological justifications for the continuation of its military aggression.

AC: These are big issues. I'm afraid I disagree with you on all three supposed 'facts'. First of all, when it comes to 'sectarian rivalries and factional tensions' it's important to draw distinctions. What we have seen across the whole region is a process in which the leadership of resistance to US imperialism and Israel has passed from secular nationalists and the left to the Islamists. This process began with the Iranian Revolution of 1978-9 but we have seen some very important developments in the past few months, notably with Hamas's defeat of Fatah in the elections to the Palestine Authority and the enormous acclaim that Hezbollah and its leader Nasrallah have received through the region for their resistance to the IDF. It's misleading to describe this as 'factionalism'. It is a historic shift that is a consequence of the political failure of secular nationalists and the left. We may not welcome this development – as a revolutionary Marxist I don't, though I am glad that someone is seriously taking on the imperialists – but we have to recognize it if the left is ever to re-emerge in the Middle East.

The case of Iraq has to be mentioned separately because it is so complex. Here the resistance, which appears to be a loose collection of Iraqi Ba'athists, nationalists, and Islamists based mainly in the Sunni Arab areas have succeeded in mounting a counter-insurgency war that, to repeat, the US shows no sign of winning. (It is essential to distinguish the mainstream of this resistance from the sectarian terrorists of Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia, formed by the late and unlamented Zarqawi.) The US sought to isolate the resistance through a policy of divide-and-rule, and in particular by allying itself to those political leaders of the Shia majority who, though having very different agendas from Washington (most obviously, often close links with Tehran), were prepared to advance their interests through collaboration with the occupation.

This policy has now badly rebounded on the occupiers. Strategically it has strengthened Iran, thanks to its influence on the Shia politicians who dominate the Iraqi client regime. Politically the biggest single bloc in the Iraqi parliament, the supporters of Moqtada al-Sadr, belong to the ruling coalition, but also oppose the occupation and have just mounted a mass demonstration in Sadr City in solidarity with Hezbollah. Finally, and disastrously from a human perspective, divide-and-rule, and the government death squads that it licensed have unleashed large-scale sectarian killings, particularly in Baghdad, that have developed a dynamic of their own. Last week the Commander of US Central Command, General Abizaid, acknowledged that 'it is possible that Iraq could move towards civil war'.² The disintegration of Iraq, which might be the result of such a war, would not work to the advantage of the US. That was why George Bush senior decided to leave Saddam Hussein in power at the end of the 1991 Gulf War.

² *New York Times*, 4 August 2006.

Secondly, the administration of George Bush junior radicalized the unilateralism that was already a visible feature of US global policy during the 1990s under Clinton. Conquering Iraq was supposed to vindicate the Bush Doctrine of unilateral preventive war, first unfolded at West Point on 1 June 2002. Instead, of course, the US has bogged down in Iraq, which has gravely limited its ability to deal with other crises such as North Korea's nuclear programme and the challenge of Hugo Chávez and the new left in Latin America. One wing of the American ruling class, represented by Brzezinski and Brent Scowcroft, Bush senior's National Security Adviser, say the Bush administration have behaved like idiots in abandoning multilateralism: they need the European Union in particular as junior partner in running the world.

What has happened since Condoleezza Rice took over as Secretary of State in January 2005 has been contradictory. On the one hand, she has tilted towards the critics, in particular by involving the other major powers in the negotiations over North Korea's and Iran's nuclear programmes. On the other hand, the administration's rhetoric, most notably in Bush's Second Inaugural Address, has if anything become harder in affirming what one might call Wilsonian imperialism – using the power of the US to spread American-style liberal democracy world-wide.

The present war in the Lebanon demonstrates that Rice's more multilateralist style is a tactical adjustment, reflecting an accommodation to the limits of American power rather than a strategic reorientation. The Iraqi quagmire has encouraged the administration to see the Islamic Republican regime in Iran as the major obstacle to securing its objectives in the Middle East. Hence the war plans revealed by Seymour Hersh back in April. It's clear the administration saw the Lebanon crisis as a heaven-sent opportunity to weaken Tehran through Israel 'degrading' Hezbollah, a powerful and strategically placed guerrilla movement closely allied to Iran. The crisis has also highlighted America's crisis of international legitimacy since it has been almost alone, backed only by Israel itself and by Britain, in opposing an immediate cease fire in Lebanon. The US is negotiating with France now because it needs French troops in Lebanon – this is a sign of weakness, not strength, on both its part and that of Israel.

Thirdly, I don't really see Iraq as a good example of the power of the corporate media. In the US itself public opinion has turned against the war much more quickly than it did in the case of Vietnam. The evident American failure in Iraq is one of the main causes of the rapid decline in Bush's popularity since Hurricane Katrina a year ago. In Britain today Tony Blair is hugely unpopular, above all because of his close support for Bush in Iraq, Afghanistan, and now Lebanon. It's true that it's hard to translate this popular opposition into the removal of the politicians responsible for these disasters, but this reflects the nature of the political system rather than the ability of the media to deceive people about what's really happening.

AM: In order to clarify the substance of my previous question and to arrive at a more accurate picture of the political conditions pertaining in the Middle East, and also as revolutionary Marxists in order to arrive at the means to a better prospect for the region, it might be better to recast my previous questions in a different mould. Let us assume that the problems facing the imperialist offensive are those you have enumerated. We then have to answer two questions. First – how durable and robust are these problems (as they stand today)? What are their significances and how effective are they? Are they capable of acting as a real barrier against the implementation of the imperialist projects of the US and her allies or merely elements that increase the cost of these projects? Second –

can the current situation in the Middle East be reduced to the various obstacles lying on the route of imperialist aggression? Are there in the current political context in the Middle East no other factors or grounds that facilitate the furtherance of the dominating imperialist offensive?

You will appreciate that your previous explanations are not entirely clear on this score. It is indeed correct that presently the Islamist movements (or to put it in more general terms, religious and/or ethnic ultra-conservative movements) play an important role in the regional political arena. Indeed they have a greater weight than seculars and leftists in the resistance struggles against the US imperialist assault. It is equally true that this superiority is an expression of a “historic shift”, the roots of which should be sought, among others, in the political defeats of secular nationalist, socialist and communist movements. But such a reasonable emphasis cannot excuse ignoring the internal weaknesses of the present resistance and to leave out this feature from our analysis of the conditions pertaining in the region.

Specifically, it is difficult to ignore the fact that the domination of religious and ethnic sectarianism or political factionalism on large parts of the anti-imperialist resistance has reduced its mobilising power. It has meant that the entire popular potentials of resistance in Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, and Afghanistan (which you chose not to mention) cannot be mobilised, nor work in tandem. It has prevented the Muslim, Jew, Christian (Assyrian, Armenians, Maronites), and Zoroastrian; Shi’i, Sunni, Bahai, and Sheikhi; the religious and agnostic; the Kurd, Arab, Persian, Turkmen, Turk, Pashto, Bluchi, Hazareh, and Tajik to see themselves as belonging to the same camp. A camp determined to stand up to the new order of slavery that is in the process of being engineered by the Pentagon and other imperialist agencies.

Moreover, the fact that the Bush administration has radicalised unilateralism does not mean that this government has become paralysed and has lost its ability to manoeuvre. We have witnessed that this same government, as you rightly pointed out, has to a great extent albeit tactically, reduced the problem of “international legitimacy” in pursuing the “war against terrorism” through a series of retreats from its previous unilateralist action. One can observe this in the behaviour of the UN Security Council in confronting Israel’s barbaric military assault on Palestine and Lebanon, or over the Iran nuclear issue. It demonstrates that despite the crisis of hegemony, the Bush government can still line up the “international community” in support of its policies and conduct in the Middle East.

And finally, if it is true that today’s Iraq is not a good illustration the power of the corporate media in shaping public opinion, Iran is. The strong American public opinion support for a new offensive in the Middle East and a military intervention in Iran, even while the US military machine is still sunk in the Iraqi quagmire, cannot be explained except through the illusion-creating power of the corporate media (see for example: USA TODAY/CNN Gallup Poll www.usatoday.com/news/polls/2006-02-13-poll.htm and Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg Pool www.pollingreport.com/iran.htm).

AC: There’s no law that says you have to agree with what I say, but I’m becoming worried that the interview will become bogged down by the repetition of the same

questions. Maybe going deeper may help to short-circuit this problem. If we want to understand what underlies the difficulties facing the US in the Middle East we have to look at the more fundamental situation of American capitalism. There is a basic discrepancy between its economic and military power. Militarily the US enjoys massive conventional and nuclear superiority over any combination of other states. Economically, however, it faces deep-seated problems of competitiveness reflecting the challenge from other centres of capital accumulation – Germany, Japan, China, etc. – that are expressed in the so-called global imbalances, notably the US balance of payments deficit, which has to be financed by a massive inflow of capital, mainly from East Asia. As both David Harvey and I have argued, the neocon adventure in Iraq was intended as the beginning of a ‘flight forward’ – the use of American military superiority to reinforce Washington’s domination of the Middle East and thereby to begin to freeze a global balance of forces that entrenched the hegemony of US capitalism.³

The significance of this context of the resistance in Iraq is that it has helped to precipitate a ‘crisis of overstretch’ for American imperialism – in other words, a crisis that highlights the limits of US power. These limits are partly military – notoriously the relatively small hi-tech force that Rumsfeld insisted the Pentagon used, rejecting his generals’ demands for far more troops, was strong enough to seize Iraq but not enough to control the country.⁴ They are also political – Washington’s inability to find a popular base in Iraq (or indeed elsewhere in the Middle East) for the kind of political project it is pursuing: hence the increasingly problematic alliance it has had to forge with the Shia parties in Iraq.

As I have already noted, being tied down in Iraq has limited Washington’s ability to take initiatives elsewhere. You see the resulting retreats as successful manoeuvres that have allowed the administration to contain the crisis of international legitimacy, but it is hardly a convincing demonstration of US supremacy to be forced to renounce, for the present at least, serious moves against Kim Jong-il or Chávez: before the outbreak of the Lebanon war, many neocons were complaining about Bush’s ‘appeasement’ of North Korea and Iran. As to Lebanon itself, if you really believe that this is going well for the US and Israel, you are alone in the world. I prefer the judgement of my friend and comrade Gilbert Achcar, who has written: ‘Whatever the final outcome of the ongoing war in Lebanon, one thing is already clear: instead of helping in raising the sinking ship of the US Empire, the Israeli rescue boat has actually aggravated the shipwreck, and is currently being dragged down with it.’⁵

This crisis of overstretch doesn’t reflect an absolute scarcity of the material resources available to American imperialism. By the standards of the Cold War, let alone the Second World War, US defence spending constitutes a relatively small percentage of national income. In principle, then, the Pentagon could greatly increase its military capabilities. But this would require much higher levels of taxation than the American rich would find comfortable. It’s also quite possible that the East Asian and European ruling classes would balk at lending the US the money it would need to pursue a much more aggressive military project given that America has already overwhelming superiority over the rest of the world. The economic and geopolitical situation is very

³ A. Callinicos, *The New Mandarins of American Power* (Cambridge, 2003) and D. Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford, 2003).

⁴ M. Gordon and B. Trainor, *Cobra II* (London, 2006).

⁵ G. Achcar, ‘The Sinking Ship of US Imperial Designs’, 7 August 2006, www.zmag.org.

different from the late 1940s and the early 1950s, when Washington was able to brigade together the advanced capitalist world under its leadership and pay for the entire enterprise itself.

This brings me to the question that you repeat about factionalism. How serious a problem the divisions you itemize are depends on the criterion by which you judge the resistance. If you are simply considering the resistance in terms of its capacity to disrupt and impede the US project, then these divisions aren't decisive. Iraq clearly shows this. So does Afghanistan, which for some reason you imagine I am trying to avoid discussing.

What's been happening there very clearly illustrates the general crisis of overstretch. The US has been trying to cut down its commitments in Afghanistan by getting Canada and the European Union to take over much of the country under the aegis of NATO. Meanwhile, the farcical Karzai regime clearly has very limited control outside Kabul. The absence of any worthwhile government in the south has created a space in which the 'Taliban' (in fact we know very little about who is fighting the US and NATO forces in southern Afghanistan) can resume activity and rebuild support. The NATO troops now participating in the US-led offensive in the south have run slap bang into much stronger resistance than they anticipated. It's true that all this further reinforces the fragmentation of Afghanistan, a process that has been going on, through the interaction of outside powers and domestic political forces, for more than a quarter century.⁶ But this fragmentation is a problem for the US in attempting to construct a viable client regime capable of ruling Afghanistan as a whole.

If we are assessing the resistance forces in terms of their ability to develop what Gramsci would call a hegemonic project – that is, by their capacity to present a programme that offers a way forward for society at large, then the picture is different. The sectarian Sunni jihadis of Iraq and Afghanistan are certainly incapable of such a project. But I don't think this is true of all of political Islam. In this context, I find your formulation of 'religious and/or ethnic ultra-conservative movements' unhelpful analytically and politically, since it reduces all forms of Islamism to reactionary identity politics. One dimension of Islam's ideological power has always been that the concept of the umma is a universalist and therefore potentially an inclusive notion.

One very interesting development that is currently taking place is the drawing together of Shia Islamist radicalism – the Iranian regime, Hezbollah, the Sadrists in Iraq – with the mother ship of Sunni Islamism, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and its close ally Hamas. Is this just a temporary tactical convergence reflecting the fact that these forces have common enemies or will it prove to be a more long-term political and ideological realignment? This is an important question for the left if it is to begin to develop its own hegemonic project. In this context it's worth pointing out that I didn't just refer to 'the political defeats of secular nationalist, socialist and communist movements', but to their failure – in other words, to their proven inability to develop successful hegemonic projects in societies such as Egypt, Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon, which created the political space the Islamists have now filled. This is a question that requires considerable analysis and discussion.

Finally back again to the question of 'the illusion-creating power of the corporate media'. The problem with using this factor to explain American public opinion's support for an attack on Iran is that it can't account for the fact that this same public

⁶ B. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan* (New Haven, 2002).

opinion has turned against the war in Iraq. We need to have a much more differentiated analysis of how the corporate media exert an influence as part of quite a complex constellation of forces that varies over time and according to the issue. My guess is that the decisive factor weighing with the American public over Iran is the memory of the humiliations the US suffered during and after the 1978-9 revolution (the Embassy crisis etc), reinforced by the more general Islamophobia that is a major constituent of contemporary racism, and renewed by Ahmadinejad's campaign against Israel. This campaign seems to have been very effective in winning support for Tehran in the Arab and Muslim world but it has had the opposite effect in countries where there is a strong Israel lobby.

It is interesting that in the US and Germany more people see Iran as a great threat to world peace than the number of those who believe the American presence in Iraq is a major threat, but the opposite is true in Britain, France, and Spain.⁷ This contrast suggests that we are not just the prisoners of structural forces such as the corporate media: for example, the kind of determined but broadly based anti-war movement that we have in Britain can have help bring about a dramatic change in popular attitudes,

AM: I understand your concerns and share in them. In the rest of our dialogue I will try to avoid repetition of questions and for the interview entering a close circuit, even where I feel that my questions may remain unanswered.

You will doubtless be aware that many of the revolutionary left's past and present mistakes are rooted in optimistic or pessimistic, and indeed reductionist and one-sided, analyses of processes and phenomena. It may be no exaggeration to say that one of the main reasons that the socialist and Marxist left was marginalised in the political arena of the last few decades in many countries (including Iran), and the failure of its efforts to build a better and more humane society, is rooted in these kinds of formulations in its analyses and assessments. My emphases in previous questions were merely attempts to arrive with your help, to the extent possible in an interview, at an accurate and multidimensional understanding of the political arena of the Middle East – an area whose developments will undoubtedly have profound effects on the future of our planet. In my view your replies, particularly where it describes the existing structural and political obstacles to the imperialist assault on the region were illuminating. I certainly learnt much from it.

In continuation, and in a closer look, I would like to ask you opinion on the other actors in the political scenes of the Middle East. We know that alongside imperialism and the governments of the region (one or perhaps two exceptions apart, dictatorial and corrupt to the marrow) it is difficult to deny the effects of collective political actions in shaping to the developments of the region. Clearly these actions cannot be limited to the anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist resistance (of which we have spoken above) and extent to other issues. Among these issues one can identify: ethnic, gender, sexual, religious, and national inequalities and oppression, class inequalities and poverty, and political despotism (religious or secular).

The Middle East today is witness to the growth and spread of numerous socio-political movements among which three groups stand out. First, the nationalist

⁷ Pew Global Attitudes Project, 'America's Image Slips, But Allies Shares US Concerns over Iran, Hamas', 13 June 2006, www.pewglobal.org.

movements of the oppressed nations and ethnic groups. (for instance Arabs, Baluchi, and Azari in Iran, Turkmen in Iraq and Iran, and Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran). Second the secular anti-dictatorial and democratic movements for freedom and legal equality (with growing roots among women, students, intellectuals, religious minorities – especially in Iran, Afghanistan and Iraq). Third, anti-capitalist movements fighting particularly against neo-liberal policies (with an expanding social base among urban and rural working people and the most deprived in most of the countries of the region). Where do you see the place and role these movements in the current political developments of the region?

Before concluding the question, I would like your indulgence to make two points in relation to my previous question. First, I too do not believe that Israel's attack on Lebanon, with all its potential contradictory results, has had any positive result for Israel or America. Moreover, I do not think that in essence my comments on Lebanon in the previous question could have permitted such a conclusion. Yet however we interpret the results of the Israeli attack on Lebanon, it is undeniably true that the US was able to line up the "international community" behind it in addressing this assault and was able to create conditions where for nearly a month the UN Security Council watched the slaughter of Lebanese women and children without batting an eyelid!

Second, I agree with you that there are real differences between the Hizbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, Al-Qaida, the Taliban, and the Islamic regime in Iran. It is vital for the left to pay attention to these differences in formulating policy. Yet, in my view, it is equally important to pay attention to the existing parallels between them. If we assume that political ideology and social and economic platforms are key factors in these parallels, then I do not believe "ultra-conservative" as a concept, provides us with a less useful analytical tool than the "radicalism" used by you. What are your views on these points?

AC: Look, I'm not an expert on contemporary Middle Eastern political movements, and therefore I can't answer your main question in any detail. Let me make three points. First of all, I certainly agree that multi-dimensional analysis is required. But I don't accept that the main problem with the left in the region is theoretical reductionism. What for many decades crippled the left in the Middle East was the formative influence of Stalinist ideology in one form or other and in particular of the idea that the main political task was to construct broad class alliances, including in particular the 'progressive', 'national' section of the bourgeoisie, against imperialism and its local allies and clients.

This led the left to a schizophrenic attitude towards the non-socialist forces confronting imperialism – in the past, the secular nationalists (Nasser, Qasim, the different sections of Ba'athism, Fatah, etc), more recently the Islamists. I think in many cases one can document an oscillation between political subordination to whoever was identified as representing the interests of the national bourgeoisie and denouncing these forces as completely reactionary, fascist, etc. This certainly implied a one-sided analysis since it failed to grasp the contradictory character of bourgeois nationalism (and here I intend this expression to cover some of the Islamists as well as Nasserites, Ba'athists and the like), which can, in concrete circumstances, lead real struggles against imperialism but will nevertheless subordinate these struggles to its class aspiration to build its own capitalist state, and therefore, ultimately, come to

terms with the dominant powers. I stress all this because these political problems haven't gone away: I'll return to this below

Secondly, if we look at the different political movements in the Middle East, it seems to me that one can identify three main trends. The first consists in the remnants of secular nationalism and Communism. These survive to varying degrees but are enormously weakened and greatly disoriented. Witness, for example, what has happened to the Iraqi Communist Party, once the most important CP in the Middle East, now shamed by the collaboration of one section in the US occupation of Iraq. And I understand some Communist fragments elsewhere in the region expressed sympathy with the invasion of Iraq as a way of getting rid of Saddam. This is a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of Popular Front politics – to imagine American imperialism as an ally in the democratic struggle! Of course, there are still many excellent revolutionaries who haven't capitulated (there are, for example, fine Iraqi Communists involved in the British anti-war movement), but the left is deeply marked by defeat and failure.

The second trend is much more interesting, because it represents a new secular force. I am thinking of a very influential tendency in the democracy movements in countries like Egypt and Iran. The dominant discourse is very familiar from the example of non-governmental organizations elsewhere in the world, as well as that of the movement for another globalization – that of 'civil society' as a distinct sphere separate from the state asserting human rights against the existing regime. It is essential to respond positively to this trend as it has given expression to the entry of a new generation into political activity against reactionary regimes.

But it is important also to stress that this ideology is an ambiguous one, reflecting the fact 'civil society' itself is a vague concept that isn't clearly differentiated from the market economy. Those influenced by it can move in a radical, anti-capitalist direction if they recognize the power of the transnational corporations, which greatly limits the extent of capitalist democracy, but it is necessary, especially in the Middle Eastern context, to go further and identify the interrelations between economics and geopolitics and therefore the close connections binding the main Arab regimes to US imperialism. If the ideology of civil society is not deepened and radicalized, then the danger is that it can be used by those in the region who see their interests as being advanced by the Bush administration's 'new Middle East' policy and by the implementation of neo-liberal economic policies. Ayman Nour and his followers in Egypt are a good example of this option, as was the 'cedar revolution' last year in Lebanon.

Finally, there are of course the Islamists. This brings me to my third general point. I accept that 'radicalism' isn't a very precise term, but it is still a lot better than 'ultra-conservatism'. Anyone who at present denounces Nasrallah, for example, as an ultra-conservative will simply make a fool of themselves. Here again we need a careful and differentiated analysis, not simply of the concrete varieties of Islamism but also of what American political scientists would call different issue-areas. Depending on the issue, different forces may seem more or less radical.

Thus if one were to identify the main ideological element at work in popular mentalities in the Middle East it would be anti-imperialist nationalism. The reasons for this are obvious – reactivated memories of the colonial past, the scale and visibility of the Western domination of the region, the constantly renewed wound of

Israel, and the pathetic subordination of most Arab regimes to Washington. What the historic shift I referred to earlier represents is the Islamists taking over the mantle of leadership of the anti-imperialist struggle from the secular nationalists and the left. To the extent to which they translate words into action, as Hezbollah have against Israel, then, on this central issue they cannot be described as ‘ultra-conservative’. Of course, when it comes to social and economic issues the picture is different – the Muslim Brotherhood, for example, supports privatization in Egypt. But even here one has to be careful. Both the Brotherhood and Hezbollah have cultivated a popular base among the urban poor through their welfare programmes, something that one can’t imagine American Republicans or British Tories doing.

In any case one has to analyse the ideologies of different Islamist political forces as totalities. Anti-imperialist nationalism isn’t, as Ernest Laclau has argued for many years, a neutral ‘element’ that can be combined with others to make an indefinitely broad variety of different political ideologies: it has a definite *class content*.⁸ Anti-imperialist nationalism is the ideology of an actual or aspirant capitalist class that seeks the way to its own independent state blocked by imperialism and therefore must mobilize the masses to help break down this obstacle.

As I have already indicated, the logic of such movements is to subordinate the interests of workers and other exploited classes to those of the bourgeois leadership. This is what explains the many defeats the left has suffered in the region. It is important to point out at this particular juncture, in the face of the euphoria created by Hezbollah’s successful resistance to the IDF, that though its leaders dress differently and use a different ideological language from those, say, of Fatah, they can repeat the same mistakes by, for example, tying their movement to presently supportive states such as the Islamic Republican regime in Iran and the Assad regime in Syria that may well be prepared to use it as a bargaining chip in their pursuit of their own geopolitical interests.

AM: I think discussing political Islam requires a separate interview. I will therefore limit myself to posing only two further questions regarding the application of “anti-imperialism nationalism” to characterize the political ideology of Islamism.

First: There is no doubt that in their conflict with imperialism, Islamist movements usually rely on nationalist rhetoric, as well as, on the nationalist sentiments of the people as their main instrument to gain mass support. However, considering the fact that concepts such as “umaat” are opposed to nation, the fact that Islamist movements distinguish between “mo’men” (believer) as opposed to “kaafar” (non-believer) and consider such distinctions central to their political ideology, how useful would it be to apply nationalism in trying to identify these movements? Furthermore, historically speaking how can we, for instance, bridge the huge distance between the pan-Islamism of Khomeini or Kashani (the spiritual leader of Fada’ian-e Islam who supported the 1953 CIA coup) and the nationalism of Mossadegh or Fatemi, one giving priority to the national interests of Iran and the other to the interests of political Islam and Islamic world revolutionary movement in absolutely opposite directions to each other? In fact the ultra-nationalist tendencies of Khomeinism have determined even the definition of the main organs of the Islamic political system in Iran. Constitutionally, the leadership of Islamic Republic (vali-e faghih) is defined as

⁸ See, most recently, E. Laclau, *Of Populist Reason* (London, 2005).

the head of the Islamic revolution (Enghelaab-e Mahdi), and the Revolutionary Guards are described as the army of this revolution, both non-territorial and non-national in terms of their role and their political geography.

Second: as you suggest, Islamist forces are currently the most powerful agents in the struggle against imperialism and Zionism in the region. However, we know that both the Taliban and Al- Qaidah developed under the supervision of Berzhinsky, or that Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood owe their initial successes to the support of Israel. The positions of the main Shia organizations in Iraq (Hezb-al-Daveh and Majles-e-Ala) or the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) in Turkey do not need any elaboration. In addition, the Iran-Contra affair or the Iranian collaboration with imperialist aggression on Afghanistan and Iraq should suffice to demonstrate the contradictory nature of the anti western and anti-imperialist positions of the Islamic regime in Iran. Considering these facts, do you think one can apply the term anti-Imperialist as an epithet to all political Islamist movements worldwide (regardless of the stage of development or the political circumstances in which they are acting). Could this provide us with a useful analytical tool?

I do not need to remind you that the declared aim of these movements is the seizure of state power and aimed reconstruction of social and political structures of countries with majority Muslim populations according to their interpretation of Sharia’.

AC: To be frank, I think the question of political Islam dominates the concluding questions of this interview. That is as it should be, since it is a very important reality that any revolutionary socialist strategy in the Middle East has to confront. I think we should treat Islamism, not as something unique or diabolical, but as a socio-political phenomenon that must be understood using the normal Marxist tools of historical interpretation. That means we should learn how to read different Islamist ideologies and organizations in order to locate them precisely within the political field and within the larger constellation of social forces nationally, regionally, and globally.⁹

Consequently, of course I don’t think ‘one can apply the term “anti-imperialist” as an epithet to all political Islamist movements word-wide’. On the contrary, I said that the classical Marxist analysis of bourgeois anti-imperialist nationalism applied to ‘*some of the Islamists*’. One has to be very concrete: the Saudi monarchy, one of the closest allies of American imperialism in the Middle East, is legitimized by the same version of Sunni Wahhabi Islam as is invoked by bin Laden and al Qaeda in waging a global war against the US.

As to your specific points, I myself noted that the Islamic concept of the *umma* is a transnational one. Al Qaeda draws on this ideological resource in order to project itself globally. But it would be a mistake to conclude from this that Islamism is inherently incompatible with nationalism. Gramsci stressed long ago that ideologies are concrete combinations of specific elements sometimes deriving from different historical periods and articulating the interests of different classes (though in each case one class interest tends to predominate). In both Stalinism and social democracy, socialism, an inherently internationalist ideology, coexisted with and was dominated by a form of nationalism. If we want to understand the political success of Islamist

⁹ See, for an exemplary attempt to do so, C. Harman, ‘The Prophet and the Proletariat’, *International Socialism*, 2.64 (1994), available at www.isj.org.uk.

movements, and in particular their role in anti-imperialist struggles in the Middle East today, one has to see how this has involved appropriating themes from the broader nationalist mentalities prevailing in the popular masses and combining them with interpretations of Islam.

Secondly, of course you are right that different Islamist tendencies and regimes that may now present themselves as anti-imperialist have a history of collaborating with imperialism but I'm not sure what this proves. Yes, al Qaeda emerged from the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, in which the CIA, the British SIS and the Pakistani ISI were instrumental in orchestrating the armed struggle of the *mujahedin*. But it's no secret that bin Laden's relationship to the US has changed a little since then. Yes, the ISI (not Brzezinski, who was long before out of office in Washington) were very actively involved in the foundation of the Taliban, but this doesn't alter the fact that today in Afghanistan the Taliban (maybe still with the support of elements of the ISI) is fighting and killing American, British, and Canadian soldiers.

And yes, to take the example that probably interests you most, it's true that the Reagan administration supplied arms to Iran in the mid-1980s, both to fund the Contra attacks on the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and to keep Iran and Iraq preoccupied with the war between them. But when the policy was exposed it proved very controversial in the American ruling class, fundamentally because since the fall of the Shah the Islamic Republican regime has been regarded by the US as a strategic enemy and therefore such manoeuvres were seen as undermining the long-term interests of American imperialism. Hence, in 1986-88, in the wake of the scandal and in response to the prospect of an Iranian victory over Iraq, American naval and air power was deployed to ensure that Saddam won. Of course, that policy shift in turn rebounded against the US when Saddam grabbed Kuwait in August 1990, but the result was not reconciliation with Tehran but the policy of 'dual containment' aimed at both Iran and Iraq and pursued by Bush Senior and by Clinton after the 1991 Gulf War.

It's important to stress this history because it would be a huge mistake to conclude from the fact that Tehran and Washington collaborated in the mid-1980s that Bush Junior isn't serious in his threats of war against Iran. As I have already noted, his administration's attempt to break out of the straitjacket of dual containment by overthrowing Saddam has strengthened Iran. The Lebanon war was an attempt to isolate Iran by removing one of its main allies, Hezbollah. Israel's defeat may, if anything, make Washington more determined on a direct attack on Iran in order to shift the regional balance of forces back in its favour.

The fact that the Islamic Republican regime was prepared, despite its anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist declarations, to collaborate with the US and Israel in the mid-1980s (and indeed on other occasions as well, for example the early stages of the 'war on terrorism') shows it is not a consistent opponent of imperialism. But this is precisely what I was arguing earlier. It is of the essence of bourgeois nationalists that, when imperialism prevents them for building their own independent capitalist state, they may lead struggles against it, but they are striving to carve out a place for themselves *within* the existing system, not to overthrow it. This means that, sooner or later, they will come to terms with imperialism, just as Nehru and Nasser, Mandela and Gerry Adams all did.

I think some of what you say tends to idealize secular nationalism. For example, you talk about Mossadegh ‘giving priority to the national interests of Iran’: what are these ‘national interests’? Do they transcend class antagonisms? Did Mossadegh represent the harmonious unity of workers, peasants, and capitalists in Iran? I don’t think so. That is why the development of independent socialist politics and organization is so important in order to articulate the distinct class project of the working class.

AM: In the campaigns that have taken shape for creating “another world”, where and do you consign the importance and place of any efforts to create a “new Middle East”? What developments are necessary to bring us nearer to building a better Middle East? From your perspective what are the obligation of the left and progressive forces in Europe and America in this regard?

AC: First of all I wouldn’t talk about a ‘new Middle East’ because this is the slogan of the Bush administration’s policy of ‘democratic’ imperialism. Given the strategic importance of the Middle East and the suffering of its peoples at the hands of their ‘own’ regimes, Israel, and the Western powers, the development of a real left in the region is very urgent. That left can begin to emerge through the coming together of three agendas – democratic (dismantling of the dictatorships, winning of real citizenship rights for the entire population, equality for women and for other oppressed groups, etc.) , social (against the exploitation of workers and peasants, poverty and economic inequality, neo-liberal ‘reforms’, for redistribution of land and other forms of wealth etc.), and anti-imperialist (against the occupations in Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan, against the Western military presence and alliances, against any new wars).

As the example of the democracy movements cited above illustrates, any left that fails to address all three agendas doesn’t deserve the name. The duty of the left in the imperialist countries is to help nurture and support any signs of such a left emerging in the Middle East. This means, above all, solidarity which needs to be directed particularly in two areas – (1) campaigning against the Western and Israeli occupations and in support of those resisting them, (2) against repression, especially though of course not exclusively when it is practised by regimes closely allied to the US and Britain.

AM: Part of the left in Europe and America, when deciding on the stance they need to take in response to imperialist intervention confine themselves to a mirror image of the imperialist position and in the first instance the US government. Wherever imperialism places a negative mark, they automatically replace it by a positive, and vice versa. For example tension or conflict between Washington and the regime of any country is enough for that regime to be labelled “progressive” and the revolutionary or socialist duty becomes not only to oppose the interventionist imperialist policies and actions or defend the right of self determination (or sovereignty) of the people of that country, but to go further and to directly support the regime. It does not matter if Castro or Chavez is ruling there or Saddam and Milosovitch, or Robert Mugabe and Ayatollah Khameni’i. Also the real content of the conflict between that regime and Washington appears to matter little, nor what are the relationship of that regime with its people (even ignoring specifically how it deals with its workers, peasants and working people). Some go so far as to consider any form of criticism to the policies of such regimes as aiding and abetting imperialism and condemn it with the justification that such criticisms provide the ideological excuse for imperialist

intervention and aggression. In the face of such behaviour what do you consider is a principled stance. Particularly where the footprints of corrupt, repressive and anti-people regimes are visible, which position do you support?

AC: I find your description very general and lacking in concrete examples. I can best respond by stating my own view. At the heart of Marxism is the idea of socialism as the self-emancipation of the working class. Therefore what counts is the self-activity of the masses. Existing regimes and states, all of which part of the capitalist world system, have to be judged in the light of this overall conception of socialism. But a key feature of global capitalism is that the world is organized into a system of states in which a few – the imperialist powers – dominate the rest economically, politically, and militarily. This poses the question of what stance Marxists should take when states fight each other.

Now it is possible to argue that since the conflicting parties are all capitalist states the left should, as a matter of principle, take no interest in who wins. This is the line anarchists generally take, but it is one that the great Marxists, from the revolutions of 1848 onwards, have always rejected. Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky all judged the wars of their day from the standpoint of what would advance the interests of the international working class. We should do the same now. So, when the US fights some corrupt and repressive Third World state we should ask: whose side's victory will be less harmful to the interests of the world working class? Given the role of the US as the main imperialist power maintaining the global relations of capitalist exploitation and domination, the question answers itself: the defeat of the US is in these cases the better outcome.

Does this mean that we should remain silent about the character of the regime (or movement) fighting the US, concealing its class character and denying its crimes? Absolutely not. I look forward to the moment when the Iranian working class resumes the work it left unfinished in 1978-9 and sweeps aside the Islamic Republican regime and indeed the capitalist class itself. But, all the same, if the US were to attack Iran tomorrow, under the present regime, the better outcome would be if the US lost – even if, as it probably would, this temporarily strengthened the regime. The global weakening of the relations of domination, the greater space for mass struggle and initiative that would result from a US defeat make this outcome the lesser evil.

This problem isn't a new one. In 1937 Japan invaded China. The ruling Kuomintang regime had drenched the Communist movement in blood when it crushed the revolutionary wave of 1925-7. Nevertheless, Trotsky argued that Chinese revolutionary Marxists should work for the defeat of Japan, an imperialist power seeking to colonize China. He defined the appropriate stance as one of political opposition but military support for the Kuomintang. In other words, if revolutionaries could facilitate the victory of the Kuomintang against Japan, they should do so, but they should maintain their political independence and promote the self-activity of the workers and peasants in order to prepare for the regime's overthrow.¹⁰ Of course, there are tensions in this formula, but they reflect one of the things that I have been stressing all along – the contradictory nature of anti-imperialist nationalism itself.

AM: Here I ask your indulgence to give a brief introduction before I pose a question on Iran. The heightening crisis in the relations between the Bush

¹⁰ For example, L.D. Trotsky, 'On the Sino-Japanese War', in *Leon Trotsky on China* (New York, 1976).

administration and the regime in Iran in the last few years has coincided with the appearance and spread of a new wave of protests and struggles by workers, students, women and the oppressed nations, ethnic groups and religious minorities in Iran. The protests and struggles have had in the main a progressive, democratic, freedom- and equality-seeking content and are in direct confrontation to the policies and actions of the ruling regime in Iran. The unilateral attention of left groups in Europe and America on the aggressive policies of imperialism in the region (which is understandable in present tense atmosphere) and the tendency in many of these groups unconditionally support the Iranian regime in its confrontation with imperialism has meant that the social and mass struggles of the Iranian people remain hidden from the view of European and American socialists. This inattentiveness has handed over the discourse over human rights, democracy and freedom entirely to the neo-conservatives and liberal imperialists. The Voice of America is the loudest voice heard supporting the protests of the people of Iran.

The Tehran Bus Drivers have struggled to create an independent trade union, and for improvement in their living and working conditions (a struggle that began over a year ago and continues to this day), and more than 1,200 were arrested without the slightest echo in the left and revolutionary press of Europe and America. In a peaceful gathering in Tehran in defence of social and legal rights and for protest against the policies of sexual apartheid tens of people were beaten up, arrested and sent to prison without the European and American left raising a finger in protest. Over the last year we have been witness to widespread mass protests in a number of cities with Kurd, Arab, Azeri, and Baluch population to which the regime responded by bloody and savage repression. Yet the European and American left saw itself without any duties in relation to the oppressed nations of the country and kept silent in the face of the repression and killings. At this moment about 10 Iranian Arab youths are awaiting a death sentence accused of acts that could be completely without foundation. Yet while everyday thousands of pages are written to prove the confluence of Ahmadinejad and Fidel Castro's paths and surface in the publication and web-sites belonging to the left, yet one can search in vain for one word in support of these victims.

In your view how defensible are these policies on the part of the left (socialist and communist)? What ideological and morel consequences do you think these forms of political behaviour will have for the international left? Should one not consider these behaviours of the same ilk as the mistakes that, as you pointed out, resulted in the paralysis and weakening of the left in Iran and the Middle East?

AC: This information is very interesting and important. It should undoubtedly be more widely publicized in the West, although I must emphasize that, for example, Action Iran here in Britain has combined campaigning against a US attack on Iran with stressing the importance of the social, democratic and national movements with Iran. I'm maybe less offended that you by the comparison between Castro and Ahmadinejad because I see them both as bourgeois nationalists (though of very different kinds). Certainly it is wrong to subordinate the independent interests of the working class to those of particular nationalist regimes and movements. But it would be also wrong to imagine for a moment that American imperialism could free the peoples of Iran from the oppression you describe.

Of course you don't imagine this, but then you have to face the question I have already posed. If Bush attacks Iran tomorrow, which side are you on? I would be on Iran's but – as Lenin put it – I would refuse to paint Ahmadinejad in communist colours; in other words, I would be for an Iranian victory *despite* his anti-Semitic rantings, *despite* the regime's capitalist class base, *despite* the repression it perpetrates. This is the politics of permanent revolution, which seeks the overthrow of imperialism *and* of the local bourgeois regimes, with the complex relations of collaboration and conflict that they have with the main capitalist powers.

One final note of warning: the national minorities in Iran were oppressed under the Shah, and continue to be oppressed under the Islamic Republican regime (incidentally, this shows how Islamism can co-exist with, in this case, Farsi nationalism). Revolutionary socialists should support their right of national self-determination. But, at the same time, we should remember what has happened with the Kurds of northern Iraq, whose corrupt and clientilistic leaders have sold themselves lock, stock, and barrel to US imperialism, providing Washington (and Israel) with a secure base in Iraq. There have been reports of agents of the US, Britain, and Pakistan being active among Iran's national minorities as part of Bush's strategy of 'regime change'. It is important that the left point to the example of Iraqi Kurdistan as a warning against the temptation that some in these minorities may have of improving their position by allying themselves to American imperialism.

AM: How do you see the anti war movement? By its powerful appearance in the prelude to the Iraq war it raised hopes in a huge way. You reflected those hopes in your excellent book *The New Mandarins and American Power*, which came out that same year. Yet a few years later, not only did this movement not grow and spread, but we have indeed witnessed its downturn. Why? In your view can we be optimistic for a resurgence of this movement? How and in what direction?

AC: It is a common error to use the gigantic protests of early 2003 to proclaim the death of the anti-war movement. One of our greatest achievements is used to hang us! The 2003 protests were on such a scale that they could only go forward by bringing down governments – which did in fact happen in Spain in March 2004, albeit in an indirect and complex way. The failure to achieve such an outcome on a broader scale – and therefore prevent or end the Iraq war – did lead to a certain ebbing of the anti-war movement relative to the high point of 15 February 2003, but the extent varied enormously depending on national conditions. Thus in the US the mainstream of the anti-war movement (including figures as principled as Chomsky) made the fatal error of putting their efforts in defeating Bush in 2004 by backing the pro-war Democrats under John Kerry, a mistake from which they are only beginning to recover.

By contrast, I think it is completely wrong to describe the condition of the anti-war movement in Britain as one of 'downturn'. The Stop the War Coalition has been able to sustain an astonishingly high level of mass mobilization for the past five years – a succession of big demonstrations, usually twice a year, all very big by historic standards, if not on the scale of 15 February 2003 – and to gain very deep roots in British society. This is reflected in its ability to mount two large marches against the Lebanon War at very short notice and at the height of the summer holidays. More generally, his central role in engineering the Iraq War fatally damaged Tony Blair's government and his complicity in the destruction of Lebanon is helping to end his premiership.

This contrast suggests that the fate of the anti-war movement has varied according to the state of the left in different countries. In the US the left has been crippled by its dependence on the Democrats. The British anti-war movement has been led by forces of the radical left that have been able to sustain it in a way that has combined consistent opposition to imperialism with an emphasis on building on a broad and inclusive basis. Elsewhere the pattern is confirmed by, for example, the decline of the Italian anti-war movement, which in 2001-4 mobilized on even a bigger scale than in Britain, but which has been very negatively affected by the entry of Rifondazione Comunista into a centre-left coalition government that is sending troops to Afghanistan and Lebanon.

The international anti-war movement in any case faces a very big challenge. The Lebanon War confirms that the Bush administration is telling the truth when it says that it is waging a global war. Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon are all fronts in this war. Iran may be the next one. The involvement of European troops in both Afghanistan and Lebanon requires a response for the left throughout the EU. Let us hope that this very threatening situation will produce an upsurge of anti-war activity, not just in Europe but globally.

AM: Finally can I ask you to turn to the global anti-capitalist movement. Where, in your view, does this movement stand today? What are the real potentials of this movement and what prospects can we expect for it? As someone who has had an important role in the formation and persistence of the regional and world social forums, what role do you think these forums have had in the global anti-capitalist movement and what role do you see them having in the future?

AC: This introduces some very big questions that extend well beyond the subject matter of the rest of our discussion. I hope your readers will forgive me if I refer them to writings where I have discussed these matters in depth, particularly *An Anti-Capitalist Manifesto* (Cambridge, 2003) and my contribution to H. Dee, ed., *Anti-Capitalism: Where Next?* (London, 2004). I would be happy to provide this latter text for translation.

AM: Many thanks for giving your time. I wish you every success in your struggles.

August/September 2006

Alex Callinicos is a member of the Central Committee of Socialist Workers Party and Professor of European Studies at Kings College London. His publications include *Trotskyism* (1990), *The Revolutionary Ideas of Karl Marx* (1999), *New Mandarins and American Power* (2001), *Anti-capitalist manifesto* (2003).

Ardeshir Mehrdad is co-editor of *iran-bulletin-Middle East Forum*. Among his publications are *State and Revolution according to the Tudeh Party* (Farsi 1987), *Between Iraq's colonialist and Islamist quagmire the "third way" is hard but possible* (2005) and *Political Islam's relation to capital and class* (with Yassamine Mather 2006)