

**Washington's Wars and Occupations:
Month in Review #50**

June 30, 2009

By Max Elbaum, War Times/Tiempo de Guerras

DISPASSIONATE ANALYSIS, PASSIONATE SOLIDARITY

For determining effective strategy and tactics, the peace movement needs hard-nosed, dispassionate analysis.

At the same time, the heart and soul of the peace movement's very existence is passionate solidarity with human beings across the globe in their battles for dignity, equality and a decent life.

Watching Iran this last month it's the passion that has come to the fore.

Certainly there are a variety of political viewpoints advocated by different strands of the Iranian protest movement. They run the gamut from infatuation with Western culture to radical demands for workers' emancipation. No doubt some promoters of the demonstrations are employed by the CIA, making trouble for a regime long in Washington's gunights.

But the bottom line is that tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, of Iranians have taken to the streets. Their overwhelmingly dominant demand is for an honest and transparent electoral process. Rippling within that are massive currents for more democratic freedoms generally, for women's rights, for an end to the forcible imposition of particular religious mores on people's day-to-day lives.

The protesters have been overwhelmingly peaceful. They've been attacked by armed police and pro-government militias. Tear-gassing, beatings and killings are captured on video.

There is a first-cut human response to this among every one of us who has ever dissented from the powers-that-be or put our bodies in the way of a repressive regime. That response is reinforced by political convictions - by the belief that through all its twists and turns, liberating change is fundamentally made by people aroused and energized in truly large numbers.

That response is solidarity.

When people go up against repressive power on this kind of scale, when they see fellow protesters beaten and shot but still stay in the street or come back the next day, societies change. They change whether or not the protests win their immediate goals. Reference points for future struggles are established. Lives are transformed. New ideas are embraced as people ponder what's happened and their place in the world.

Those with the guns frequently win in the short run. The process of change is more difficult, and less linear, than any blueprint or neat formula can capture. But when all is said and done, mass human action, with all its confusions, imperfections and complexities, is the only way to push that long moral arc of the universe faster toward justice.

FROM TEHRAN TO BILIN

Speaking of complexities: there are bad as well as good reasons why the world's eyes were focused on Iran this month. The scale of protest there and the vivid images of unarmed young people confronting armed paramilitaries are good reasons. But it's not to be denied that the Western media, and Western political establishment, much prefers to focus on such scenes in Tehran than, say, Palestine.

After all, every week there is a demonstration of unarmed Palestinians against Israel's "Separation (Apartheid) Wall" cutting right through many villagers' land. The village of Bilin is the most active site now. Other villages have been at the pivot in the past. Since 2005, at least 18 Palestinians have been killed by heavily armed soldiers at these peaceful protests. Many more have been beaten and gassed. Though Friends of Freedom and Justice/Bilin (www.bilin-ffj.org), the International Solidarity Movement and other groups have worked tenaciously to publicize these protests, they don't make the same kind of front page news here in the U.S.

Our passionate solidarity must be the same. And our dispassionate analysis explains why there is a disparity in news coverage. The U.S. has long backed Israeli occupation, but is hostile to any regime in Tehran or elsewhere that does not bow to U.S. dictates. No matter if that regime is internally progressive or, as is the case with the current Islamic Republic, internally repressive and reactionary.

Perhaps on the level of immediate maneuver and realpolitik, the short-term result of the protest and repression in Tehran will benefit the right-wingers who want war. But at another level, all the pictures and videos from Iran, and all the reports about divisions within the Iranian power-structure, are a blow to the stereotypes about Iran that have permeated U.S. culture since the hostage crisis of 1979. Millions will now question the racist propaganda that all Iranians are simply America-hating fanatics, and all Iranian leaders aspiring Adolf Hitlers.

Likewise, the more the peace movement can get the story of Bilin in front of the U.S. people (and there are new openings given the Washington-Tel Aviv conflict over Israeli settlements), the bigger a blow can be struck against the racist demonization of Palestinians as terrorists.

INTERNAL DYNAMICS PLUS NEW CONDITIONS

The protest upsurge in Iran has deep roots. The country has a long history of democratic and radical movements. These were a vital component of the popular surge that brought the progressive nationalist government of Muhammad Mossadeq to power after World

War II. Urgency to repress these democratic aspirations (especially in a country where U.S. oil was under their soil) was a key driving force of the CIA coup that overthrew Mossadeq in 1953. Working class radicalism and popular democratic currents were a major force in the millions-strong movement that overthrew the Shah in 1978-79. In the ensuing battle for power these progressive forces were defeated via bloody repression by the conservative clerical wing of the anti-Shah upsurge. But they never disappeared, politically or culturally. It's no accident that Mossadeq's picture was carried by many in the current demonstrations, signifying a demand for democracy with deep indigenous, anti-foreign domination roots.

That Iranian protest erupts now is also due mainly to developments within Iran. Further cultural changes, growing resentment of the conservative clergy's intervention in people's personal lives, economic hardship (blamed by some on Ahmadinejad's leadership), a series of free-wheeling presidential debates that galvanized excitement, and then an official rush to declare a winner even before votes could be counted which - whether the totals were fraudulent or not - convinced millions that the balloting was rigged.

But another factor was changes in the regional and global climate. Since Obama took office, the prospect of a U.S. or Israeli military attack on Iran is widely perceived to have receded. And it seems like the U.S. really is on the way out of Iraq (if far too slowly and ambiguously from the point of view of the antiwar movement). Obama's respectful addresses to the government and people of Iran, and his Cairo speech which among other things admitted the U.S. role in the 1953 coup, altered the ideological terrain. Bunker mentality on all sides has eased a bit, and that opened up space for protest in Iran that could less easily be dismissed as "giving comfort to the Great Enemy."

There should be no surprise here. Periods of great tension and war or the threat of war produce strong impulses to 'rally round the flag' or "follow the leadership in the name of national security' in every society.

It's not surprising in this context that the Israeli right and many U.S. Neocons preferred an Ahmadinejad victory. Articles in the Israeli press were quite explicit: the biggest advocates of attacking Iran argued that it would be far easier to win support for such an attack with Ahmadinejad in power; that the victory of a "moderate" might - horror of horrors - reduce support for another pre-emptive war.

There's a related point to be made about reaction to event in Iran in the media controlled by Arab regimes - Egypt and Saudi Arabia in particular - that are slated by Washington geo-strategists to make up the core of a regional anti-Iran alliance. For years their media has been on a campaign to try to convince their populations that the Iranian Shiites are more of a threat to Arab well-being than U.S.-backed Israeli colonialism. One might think they would jump at the opportunity to paint the Iranian regime in a negative light. But in fact Saudi and Egyptian media have been playing down the Iranian protests. Apparently exposing "their own people" to images of people rising up against repressive authority is too dangerous, so they took a pass on this chance to make Tehran's rulers look bad.

It is not possible to say how all this will play out. As of this writing it seems that Ahmadinejad will get a second term in office and the period of massive protests will at least temporarily recede. But what has been set off beneath the surface, and how it affects the foreign policy calculations of those who retain power, is unclear. There are arguments that this result will make it harder for Washington and Tehran to reach some sort of negotiated solution to their outstanding conflicts. But it is also possible that a regime in Iran that has lost significant legitimacy at home, and an Obama administration that is trying to salvage maximum U.S. influence out of the wreckage left by George Bush, can come to terms; with the U.S. extending security guarantees and normalization in return for close international monitoring of a peaceful-use-only Iranian nuclear program and certain kinds of joint cooperation in relation to Afghanistan and Iraq.

Such a deal will be furiously opposed by the Israeli leadership and U.S. Neocons, who are eager for confrontation and war. And from the peace movement's point of view, such a deal would still leave us a huge agenda of work. For instance, it would be extremely unlikely to force an end to the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan where Washington and Tehran are mostly on the same side. Underscoring the horrors of that war: the recent Pakistani Army offensive in the Swat region, obviously egged on by Washington, has created a civilian refugee flow on a scale comparable to the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who were driven from their homes in the period following the 2003 U.S. invasion.

Still, such a deal would be a significant advance over where the region stands now. It could bring the kind of thaw that (besides drastically reducing the danger of region-wide war) could undermine one of Israel's biggest excuses for stonewalling Palestinian rights. Put bluntly: the long road to peace and getting the U.S. totally out of the Middle East/West Asia still goes through a U.S.-Iranian détente, not a U.S. Iranian cold or hot war.

THE WORLD IS CHANGING

On another level, the explosion of protest in Tehran is a sign that the world is changing once again. The "War on Terror" period in which Washington was "all force, all the time" is coming to an end. Politics are opening up, creating new space for mass unarmed movements in the Middle East (Latin America has been ahead of the curve here). And those movements in turn are changing politics further. Imperial intervention hasn't ended, much less the imperial system. But a new phase is beginning.

Global shifts in the balance of economic power are an integral part of this shifting landscape. Perhaps it is no accident that the week of huge protests in Iran also saw the first summit of Brazil, Russia, India and China (the "BRIC" countries) in Yekaterinburg, Russia. Meeting without anyone from the U.S. or Western Europe allowed to attend, the gathering of the four largest "emerging economies" explored the idea of supporting a new world financial arrangement in which the U.S. dollar would no longer be the sole global reserve currency. The second paragraph of the New York Times story on the gathering presented the big picture:

"By some predictions, the four nations... will surpass the current leading economies by the middle of this century, a tectonic shift that by this reckoning will eventually nudge the U.S. and Western Europe away from the center of world productivity and power."

A signal from Tehran that millions are no longer prepared to live in the old way... A "tectonic shift" in global economic power... these are the new realities that the new administration in Washington must confront. Unlike his predecessor, Obama does not seem to believe these facts on the ground can be simply bullied and bludgeoned out of existence. Rather, a shift is needed, with the goal of a "soft landing" that will leave the U.S., though weakened, still with the maximum degree of clout possible.

The antiwar movement has no interest in maintaining U.S. clout. To the contrary, our agenda of an end to war and militarism, of peaceful cooperation to tackle the global problems that threaten humanity's very existence, requires a determined battle to push back U.S. power. But periods of diminished tensions, with the decline of hateful demonization of "the other" and the maximum space for popular movements, both have benefits in themselves and provide the most favorable conditions to advance our cause.

PALESTINIAN STRUGGLE TO THE FORE

In that regard, the Israel/Palestine conflict is the second pivot - along with the U.S. confrontation with Iran - around which war and tension boil. In that conflict, it is clearer than ever that Israel's leadership believes the more boiling the better. (See Phyllis Bennis' assessment of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's bellicose June 14 speech at http://www.tni.org/detail_page.phtml?act_id=19602)

Israeli leaders know that the Palestinians will not simply surrender, which is the only type of "peace" they are willing to accept. They recognize that as a result of their wars in Lebanon and Gaza and continued settlements-building, world opinion - even substantial chunks of U.S. Jewish opinion - is turning against Israeli policies. For justification of continued intransigence and colonization, then, they fall back on ever-shriller warnings about the "existential threat" to "Jews everywhere," mainly demonizing Iran.

In one or another form, this has worked up to now. The combination of Israel's value to Washington in keeping the Arab world under the empire's thumb, and the particular influence of the Israel Lobby in U.S. political life, has produced 40-plus years of a reactionary "special relationship."

It may keep working. But the changes taking place in the world indicate other options may be possible. Popular sentiment in the Arab and Muslim world cannot be suppressed forever, and as U.S. power erodes it has begun to dawn on many heavy-weights in the U.S. elite that there are downsides as well as upsides to antagonizing the entire Arab and Muslim world via blank-check backing for Israel. The passages on Israel-Palestine in Obama's Cairo speech, while far short of what would be said by advocates of a true peace-and-justice agenda, marked a definite shift in Washington's tone and content. The

tussle between Washington and Tel Aviv over Israeli settlement policy is another indication that change is underway.

The pressure that can be mounted by peace and Palestine solidarity activists is nowhere near yet enough to force the kind of changes in Washington policy that would start changing things on the ground. But when an emperor-has-no-clothes piece about Israeli colonialism ("Fictions on the Ground," by Tony Judt) is the main op-ed in the New York Times (June 22) it's a sign the winds are changing.

So for our side it is a moment to go all out. What is not imaginable today may enter at least the realm of the possible tomorrow. Unbelievable as it seems now, for example, 53 years ago a U.S. President forced Israel, Britain and France to end a military attack on Egypt designed to retake the Suez Canal and crush all Arab nationalist aspirations, and to withdraw tail between their legs. Dwight Eisenhower was hardly a partisan of anti-imperialism; he simply judged that given the then-existing balance of forces, it was in U.S. interest to crack the whip against its closest allies. That is at least some food for thought.

*You can sign-on to **War Times/Tiempo de Guerras** e-mail Announcement List (2-4 messages per month, including our 'Month in Review' column), at <http://www.war-times.org>. **War Times/Tiempo de Guerras** is a fiscally sponsored project of the Center for Third World Organizing. Donations are tax-deductible; you can donate on-line at <http://www.war-times.org> or send a check to **War Times/Tiempo de Guerras**, c/o P.O. Box 22748, Oakland CA 94609.*