



## ***Washington's Wars and Occupations*** **Month in Review #37**

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### **DECISION LOOMS: ESCALATE, OR RETREAT & RETRENCH?**

Across the Middle East, the Bush-Neocon post-9/11 project faces failure.

In the last month alone, Washington has had to endure one humiliation after another:

- In Lebanon, the pro-U.S. government (prodded by Israel and/or Washington) announced a set of steps aimed at Hezbollah. Hezbollah and the broader Lebanese opposition movement – which together represent the majority of Lebanese – resisted. When the dust had settled the proposed steps were retracted and, as *The New York Times* headline put it, the agreement ending the fighting “Leaves Hezbollah Stronger.”
- In Pakistan, the new government defied U.S. “advice” and signed a peace agreement May 21 with indigenous militant leaders in the so-called “tribal areas” bordering Afghanistan. Only the day before the Bush administration had declared that even negotiating with these militants would give “breathing space” to terrorists. Washington’s anxiety here is directly connected to worries about growing Afghan opposition to the U.S. military presence there.
- Adding insult to injury, even a personal request from Bush himself couldn’t get Washington’s Saudi Arabian clients to agree to increase oil production.

All this underscores the fact that Bush’s Iraq adventure, largely designed to show the world that the U.S. can do anything it pleases, instead ended up revealing – and exacerbating – U.S. weakness.

As a result, bitter divisions have opened up in the policy-making elite. The die-hards – now rallying around John “Stay-100-Years-in-Iraq” McCain – still think military force can win “victory.” They continue to press for escalation, up to and including an attack on Iran. The “realists” – a broad layer that stretches from key advisers to Barack Obama to Republican Senators like Chuck Hagel – think some kind of retrenchment is imperative. They envision at least partial withdrawal from Iraq and diplomatic engagement with Iran in order to stave off even deeper undermining of U.S. power.

The scale of disasters confronting Washington (and the timing of U.S. electoral cycles and White House transition) means the decision-making window for this choice consists of the next ten months. We may see a new reckless act – such as an attack on Iran – that will

make the invasion of Iraq seem like it was a “reality-based” decision. Or the world, the country, and the antiwar movement will be confronted with all the complexities of a wounded imperial power attempting to retrench but not yet ready (that’s where mass pressure comes in!) to leave Iraq (much less the entire the Middle East) to the people who live there.

### **“OVERPLAYED THEIR HAND”**

At the beginning of this month, Washington and Tel Aviv clearly thought they were going to get somewhere in Lebanon. They launched an orchestrated campaign via the Lebanese government’s announcement that it was going to: (1) dismantle Hezbollah’s telecommunications system, which had been a key factor in successful resistance to Israel’s 2006 invasion; and (2) remove a figure sympathetic to the anti-Israel resistance from head of security at Beirut airport. As the government anticipated, Hezbollah resisted with blockades and protests. Then pro-government militias resorted to arms and a prepared-ahead-of-time propaganda campaign began accusing Hezbollah of provoking the conflict and armed battles.

Within days it was clear they had miscalculated. The pro-government militias (many of whom were little more than mercenaries) collapsed and often fled. Few outside the Western and Israeli media – and certainly not the Lebanese majority – bought the U.S./Israeli “blame Hezbollah” crusade. As *The New York Times* admitted May 22, the government and its backers “overplayed their hand.”

The upshot was an agreement May 21 in which the government had to do even more than retract its original provocative decrees. In what the *Times* called “a significant shift of power in favor of Hezbollah and its allies” the opposition won the power to veto any cabinet decision and agreement on a new government. Within days General Michel Suleiman – long supported as a compromise candidate by Hezbollah against government resistance – was elected President.

### **PAKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN**

Blatant defiance of Washington by Pakistani officials has become the norm since Bush’s chosen dictator, Pervez Musharraf, suffered a huge electoral setback last February. The country’s new parliamentary majority – which is laying the groundwork to completely oust its lame-duck President – has the heretical idea that it should make peace rather than war with its own citizens. Bush and the Neocons hate such “appeasement” policies (more on “appeasement” below). But they no longer can do much about them.

Washington’s weakness in Pakistan is directly linked to the deterioration of the U.S. position in Afghanistan. It’s right in *The New York Times* (May 22) for anyone who is willing to read a few paragraphs down from the misleading headlines:

Increasingly, the question before the allies is how much longer it will take in crucial provinces to lock in tentative gains and bring real security and strong government. As important is whether that can be done before the war wears down relations within the American-led alliance, and between it and the Afghan people. Progress is so slow that Afghans often wonder aloud whether the U.S. actually wants the Taliban to win. ‘No one claims this is going to be a year of full stabilization or even declining violence, let alone an end to the conflict,’ said Christopher Alexander, deputy special representative for the U.N. in Afghanistan.

## IRAQ FAILURE — IRAN IN THE GUNSIGHTS?

President Bush is still in a parallel universe about Iraq: “We are on our way to victory,” he said in a May 22 speech that McCain immediately echoed. The reality lived by Iraqis is totally different.

Iraqis face an occupying power killing and demeaning them daily. A recent outrage even made the U.S. press: “U.S. Airstrike Kills 8 Civilians” read the headlines in many U.S. newspapers May 23. The dead included two children and an elderly man; police officials said these unarmed civilians were killed while running away from a U.S. air attack. What seldom makes the press is the underlying trend: this spring has seen a dramatic increase in the use of helicopter-fired missiles and U.S. air power in general, including in densely populated urban areas. What is reported here as occasional “unfortunate accidents” or “collateral damage” is seen by millions of Iraqis as an integral feature of foreign occupation.

So are incidents like the admission that a U.S. sniper used a Koran as target practice near Baghdad. U.S. officials said the sniper was disciplined and removed from Iraq. But the Iraqi cabinet called for him to be prosecuted and anger surged among the population at large.

Against such a day-to-day backdrop, it’s not surprising that reports began to surface May 23 that Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani – the most respected and powerful religious/political leader in Iraq – has begun to issue private *fatwas* (religious edicts) affirming the legitimacy of armed attacks on occupying troops. Middle East expert Juan Cole, in a must-read discussion of Sistani’s new stance May 23 ([www.juancole.com](http://www.juancole.com)) writes that he has “all along believed that Sistani would ultimately issue a *fatwa* saying that it was illegitimate for there to continue to be foreign troops on Iraqi soil.” Sistani’s relative quiet so far has been a key factor preventing things in Iraq from being even worse for the U.S. than they already are. If he continues in the direction these latest reports indicate, even George Bush may finally recognize that a U.S. “victory” is not in the cards.

Though it won’t admit it, the administration is very worried. Following his usual response to trouble, Bush identifies a scapegoat/enemy and signals that military force is the way to “solve” the problem. Iran has been the enemy of choice for months now, and once again it is pump-up-the-volume time. National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley told reporters last week that the U.S. was entering a period of “increased pressure” on the Iranians. Israeli Army radio reported that a senior Bush staffer told Israeli officials that both Bush and Dick Cheney support military action against Iran. The White House denied the report. But at the same time it flaunted Bush’s bellicose speech before the Israeli parliament in which he compared any willingness to negotiate with Iran to “appeasement” of the Nazis in the 1930s.

Bush’s speech was clearly a threat directed against Iran. But it also was intended to impact U.S. domestic politics. Bush aides admitted it was a volley against Barack Obama’s pro-negotiation position, and the President’s theme was immediately picked up by McCain. “Appeasement-baiting” will be added to the general racist, anti-Muslim, fear-mongering arsenal that the “escalate-to-victory” crowd is resorting to in face of a U.S. public that has turned decisively against the Iraq war.

## ISRAEL, SYRIA, AND THE NAKBA

Ironically, the first major player to defy Bush's anti-appeasement diatribe in practice was the Israeli government. Israel acknowledged that it was engaged in negotiations with "terrorist-supporting" Syria within days of Bush's remarks.

Tel Aviv's decision doesn't indicate that it has all of sudden realized that it is unjust to occupy other peoples' land. Israel's chokehold on the Palestinians remains and new settlement activity in the occupied West Bank continues. But there is calculation that talks in order to (as Israeli spokespeople put it) "wean Syria away from Iran and from its support for Hezbollah and Hamas" might work better than another war.

This too is a response to failure. Israel failed in its attempt to crush Hezbollah with its Lebanon invasion of 2006. Its latest provocation in Lebanon (see above) fell flat on its face. The effort to starve Gaza and to isolate Hamas (which holds power there) is in trouble, with more and more voices internationally (and within Israel itself) saying that sooner or later talking with Hamas will be necessary. Indirect negotiations mediated by Egypt are already happening.

Perhaps most dangerous for Tel Aviv was the climate surrounding what were supposed to be triumphal celebrations on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Israel's founding. In most of the world, this anniversary was marked by commemorations of the *Nakba* ("catastrophe") of 1948 and harsh criticism of Israeli actions which drove tens of thousands of Palestinians from their homes. Even in the U.S. (where, outside of Israel itself, Zionism holds its firmest grip) there was a noticeable uptick in mainstream articles (as well as protests by Palestine solidarity activists) that raise issues that apologists for Israeli occupation do not like to see mentioned. (See for instance: [www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2008/05/05/080505crbo\\_books\\_remnick](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2008/05/05/080505crbo_books_remnick).)

When the term "Nakba" appears in both the *New Yorker* and *Time* there is change in the air.

It remains a hard road. The antiwar movement has to walk on many paths at the same time. We have a contribution to make to insuring that fear-mongering, racism and "appeasement-baiting" prove costly to their advocates and not to their targets. We have a fight to wage against the whole "us-them/enemy" discourse that justifies war, torture and occupation. We have an agenda of "bring them all home now" that has to be projected into the heart of the nationwide conversation over Iraq until it is won.

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