



## **Washington's Wars and Occupations Month in Review #60**

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### **OVER-STRETCH, HALF-MEASURES, TROUBLE AHEAD**

The large Afghan city of Kandahar has been targeted for the next U.S. military offensive. But a survey sponsored by the U.S. Army itself shows that 94% of Afghans in the area support negotiations with the Taliban and reject military confrontation. Eighty-five percent say they regard the Taliban as "our Afghan brothers." Anyone wonder why? This item in *The New York Times* the day after its report on the survey sheds some light on the matter: "NATO apologized for shooting to death four unarmed Afghan civilians this week and acknowledged that it had wrongly described two of the victims as known insurgents."

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak said in April that "The world isn't willing to accept that Israel will rule another people for decades more... the alienation that is developing with the U.S. is not good... we receive three billion dollars from them each year; we get the best planes in the world from them... we must act to change things." But is anything changing on the ground? Only for the worse: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu just announced again that "everybody knows" Jewish settlement building will continue in Palestinian East Jerusalem. Israel expelled a Palestinian from the West Bank in the first use of new law that human rights advocates say lays the basis for massive expulsions and ethnic cleansing. A new round of fear-mongering about alleged Hezbollah missiles indicates Israel may repeat its long-time pattern of inventing or hyping a "provocation" to justify starting another war.

News broke April 17 of a classified memo from Defense Secretary Robert Gates warning that the U.S. does not have an effective policy for dealing with what the administration regards as Iran's desire for a "breakout" nuclear potential. (That is, developing the capacity to build a nuclear weapon but not actually constructing one.) Besides the Neocons jumping all over the issue to push their attack-Iran agenda, the report created a buzz because it comes at a time when the U.S. is losing ground in its stand-off with Iran. Russia and China will not agree with harsh sanctions. Most of the global South regards the U.S. stance as utter hypocrisy. And on the non-nuclear front Iran's influence in Baghdad and Kabul is rising while Washington's falls.

What it all means is that on these (and other) tension-points, today's "business as usual" can't be sustained. U.S. power is too great for Washington to be thrown into headlong retreat by the forces now arrayed against it, even in Latin America where progressive social movements and left-leaning political parties have the greatest initiative. But the empire is over-stretched militarily, financially and politically. And the current administration's effort to orchestrate a limited retrenchment is in trouble almost everywhere. Even where President Obama is most willing to take a step back from Bush-era adventurism – as in the more restrictive doctrine for

use of nuclear weapons and the recent agreement with Russia to reduce stockpiles – the steps remain half-measures leaving huge dangers in place.

Things may roll along on their current track for weeks, months or even a few years yet. But sooner or later, something is going to snap. And conditions for the next crisis to force major U.S. retreats rather than escalation are better than they have been at any time since 9/11. Right wing attacks on the White House for alleged “far left radicalism” are nonsense. But they are so fierce, high-pitched and racist because the Neocons, the Israel Lobby and other fear-mongers correctly sense that their grip on the foreign policy establishment and public opinion has weakened. Peace activists and all progressives have played a role in that – and with grave dangers ahead have an ever greater role to play going forward.

### **AFGHANISTAN: HEARTS & MINDS ALREADY LOST**

The same day *The New York Times* reported on the Kandahar survey it ran another story under the headline “A Killing Further Erodes Afghan Faith in Leaders.” Reading past the headline shows that “further” is beside the point. Afghan lack of faith in the U.S.-supported regime and fury at foreign occupation are already at overwhelming levels. For Washington, the battle for Afghan hearts and minds is already lost.

That reality is beginning to sink in even to U.S. troops on the frontlines. According to a poll conducted by the *Military Times* newspapers, the percentage of active duty military personnel who think the U.S. will win the war has declined from 77% in 2008 to 68% in 2009 to 60% in January–February 2010. And one has to wonder what effect it has on U.S. military morale (not to mention the thinking of Afghans!) when President Hamid Karzai threatens to “join the Taliban” as he recently did while trying to maneuver between his druglord/warlord allies and his U.S. backers.

Perhaps even NATO is getting the message. On April 23 NATO foreign ministers endorsed a plan to begin turning over “lead combat roles” to Afghan troops. U.S. and NATO soldiers are supposed to shift gradually to a “support” role. The decision comes under pressure from European public opinion which has turned decisively against the war. But even if implementation does meet the Obama administration’s stated goal of “beginning” to withdraw combat troops in July 2011, events are outpacing such gestures toward de-escalation. One flare-up after another will keep posing the decisive question: Is the U.S. ready to meet the key precondition for negotiations, national reconciliation and regional stability – a commitment to rapid and total withdrawal? Until that bullet is bitten, more blood is going to be shed in a losing war that threatens to engulf Pakistan as well.

### **ISRAEL: SHIFT IN WASHINGTON CLIMATE, NO SHIFT IN WASHINGTON POLICY**

An April 13 event at the utterly mainstream Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington featured five former U.S. Ambassadors to Middle Eastern countries. The discussion underscored the changes taking place in the U.S. elite’s thinking about Israel-Palestine. A report on the Holy Land Peace Project blog ([holylandpeace.blogspot.com](http://holylandpeace.blogspot.com)) stressed that all the panelists agreed that:

- Continued Israeli settlement building (not just expansion, but building) is a major obstacle to the peace process and undermines the U.S. role as a mediator in the region;
- General David Petraeus was correct that U.S. interests are threatened by the continuing Israeli-Palestinian impasse;

- Picking a fight with Netanyahu over settlements was right, but it should have been placed in a more comprehensive context and backed by clear elements of American policy; and
- The Obama administration needs to take a closer look at the Arab Peace Proposal and perhaps even make it a part of a comprehensive peace policy.

Such a consensus is a far cry from the stance of Palestine solidarity activists. But for it to become the “common sense” of big sections of the U.S. elite is a major change. Still, there remains a huge gap between ideas and action: even if the foreign policy establishment is thinking differently, the U.S. has yet to put one ounce of material pressure on Israel.

Time is running out. The Israeli leadership sees the changes underway as clearly – or more clearly – than the U.S. antiwar movement. They know that their interests in “greater Israel” go beyond what Washington calculates is the optimum situation for the U.S., namely that Israel remain the strongest state in the region, but that it make enough concessions on borders and Jerusalem to give “moderate” Palestinian leadership sufficient incentive to cut a deal that has any chance whatsoever of being accepted by the majority of Palestinians and the broader Arab and Muslim worlds. So while figures like Ehud Barak make plaintive cries that Israel needs to “change,” Netanyahu with the support of a rightward-moving Israeli Jewish majority seems to have decided on a policy of grab more while the grabbing is good. That is a recipe for more settlements, more expulsions, more assassinations, maybe even another major attack on Lebanon or Gaza.

### **IRAN: U.S LOSING BATTLE FOR GLOBAL OPINION**

Defense Secretary Gates’s leaked memo provided another occasion for the Neocons to bash Obama and call for a military strike on Iran. But the military brass does not support the Neocon line. Speaking at Columbia University in late April, Chair of the Joint Chiefs Mike Mullen restated the “attack would solve nothing” position he and other top military figures have argued for several years now: “I think Iran having a nuclear weapon would be incredibly destabilizing. I think attacking them would create the same kind of outcome...”

A big factor in the military brass’ opposition to a military strike is, according to former U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Charles Freeman, “that nearly 200,000 U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan are hostages, whose vital lifelines would be attacked by Iranian-supported militias if the U.S. hits Iran.” Another is that the U.S. is losing the battle for global opinion on this front. On April 17 Iran’s “Supreme Leader,” Ali Khamenei, gave a speech in which he blasted the U.S. for having been the only nation to attack another with a nuclear weapon and challenged Washington’s credentials as a guardian against proliferation, given U.S. favoritism toward nuclear-armed Israel. Khamenei called for complete nuclear disarmament and repeated his fatwa against the use or even the threatened use of nuclear weapons, which he calls absolutely forbidden in Islamic law. Juan Cole drew out the significance, writing that “An American audience assumes that Khamenei is just lying... so his words fall on deaf ears here. But in much of the world, Khamenei’s speech will be taken as devastating to the U.S. position.”

### **NUCLEAR POLICY CHANGES: GOOD BUT NOT GOOD ENOUGH**

In the face of furious right-wing opposition, the Obama administration’s April moves on nuclear policy are important and positive. The latest START agreement with Russia, signed in Prague on April 8, cuts warheads on both sides and opens the door to further reductions. Likewise for the narrower conditions under which U.S. doctrine allows use of nuclear weapons: unlike the Bush Administration’s policy, Washington now states it will not utilize nuclear retaliation for chemical and biological attacks. And the White House’s injecting a sense of urgency into a multilateral

effort to prevent nuclear material from falling into the hands of non-state actors is to be welcomed – the danger of nuclear small-group terrorism in the coming decades is all too real.

But loopholes and double-standards show just how much further there is to go. Washington says it “reserves the right” to use nuclear weapons against countries that have not signed or “fulfilled” their obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This statement was clearly meant as a warning to Iran and North Korea, since Washington treats India, Pakistan and Israel (the three countries besides North Korea which have not signed the NPT and do possess nuclear weapons) as valued allies.

Further, Washington is increasing spending on so-called “advanced conventional arms” which are to be as destructive as small tactical nukes. Especially dangerous is the research plowing ahead on the Prompt Global Strike program which aims to produce warheads able to strike any target on the globe within an hour of launch. This weapon is extremely destabilizing not least because it can be easily mistaken for a nuclear attack.

### **A CHANGING LATIN AMERICA FACES DEATH SQUADS REDUX**

Long-time observers of Latin America often say this part of the world does best when the attention of the U.S. is focused elsewhere. That’s been the case, more or less, since 9/11. As much of the continent continues to tilt leftwards, Washington is scrambling to put obstacles in its way, with the resurgence of death squads in post-coup Honduras an especially dangerous sign. A full review of recent events in Latin America would take far more space than we have here, but here are some highlights from a few countries:

**Mexico:** Even Mexico’s right-wing PAN party is fed up with the racist excesses of U.S. immigration policy. On April 27, Mexico issued a travel advisory for Mexican citizens visiting Arizona, in response to that state’s ultra-repressive new immigration law. President Felipe Calderón denounced the law as “racist.” This is the same PAN government which for the last four years has fought a disastrous war with Mexican drug cartels, using the gangs’ growing power as a pretext for deploying the Mexican army in policing activities.

**Brazil:** Like India and China, Brazil continues in the grips of an economic juggernaut, possessing the second largest GDP in this hemisphere, and the 9<sup>th</sup> largest in the world. But the rapidly rising tide is not lifting every boat. Brazil’s level of income inequality is the 10<sup>th</sup> highest in the world, right behind three other Western Hemisphere states, Haiti, Colombia, and Bolivia. (For comparison, the U.S. ranks number 42 on the list; China, 54; and India, 79; a higher number representing more even income distribution. All data from the CIA’s World Factbook page for Brazil: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/br.html>.)

This tremendous gap between rich and poor presents a huge challenge to President Lula da Silva’s Workers Party and the Brazilian left. Another such challenge is the conflict over proposed construction of a giant hydroelectric project in the Amazon rainforest. The government sees the project as a way of powering Brazil’s economic expansion without adding to the world’s carbon dioxide burden. But the dam, which would be the world’s third largest, would create irreversible environmental changes in the Amazon rainforest, and most likely destroy the way of life of the Kayapo people who live where it would be built.

**Honduras:** Some of the most disturbing news comes from Honduras. When President Manuel Zelaya was ousted in a coup last June, the U.S. at first refused to recognize the resulting government. But the Obama administration soon turned against Zelaya and when he returned to Honduras in September 2009, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton approved the coup government’s

imposition of a curfew, and said nothing to stem the wave of arrests, beatings, disappearances, and political murders that followed.

On November 30, 2009, Porfirio Lobos, a wealthy right-wing rancher was proclaimed winner of an election organized by the coup-makers. Since then, repression against popular organizations has increased so much that many Hondurans think their country is returning to the bad old days of the 1980s, when the Honduran military, swelled with U.S. funding and training, terrorized labor unions and campesino organizations. This year has already seen the murders of seven journalists. Members of anti-coup and pro-campesino organizations have been assassinated. The Committee for Human Rights of Honduras reports that death squads have re-emerged, some led by former members of the infamous 3-16 Battalion, which terrorized opponents of the military regime in the 1980s.

Secretary Clinton has been pressuring other Latin American governments to recognize the Lobos' government – something many are loath to do for a government elected under military dictatorship. *The New York Times* reports that Clinton also announced that the U.S. would restore \$30 million of foreign aid to Honduras, which had been suspended after the coup. Meanwhile resistance continues as many Hondurans are organizing for a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution, led by an umbrella organization called Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular.

An alternative to the OAS? A key regional development is the February 2010 agreement to form an alternative to the Organization of American States. Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños (CELAC), or, in English, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States includes all the current members of OAS plus Cuba, but excludes Canada and the U.S. Participating states will now draw up a charter to be ratified at a meeting in Caracas in July 2011. Leaders as diverse as Mexican President Felipe Calderón and Bolivia's Evo Morales agreed that the region needs a strong organization that is not dominated by the U.S.

### **UNSTABLE WORLD AS U.S. SOCIAL FORUM APPROACHES**

Altogether such global instability places a premium on advocates of peace within the U.S. regaining some initiative. Many groups and individual activists have already begun to think in a new way about the relationship of the fight for peace abroad and key struggles for social justice at home. That spirit is likely to infuse the upcoming U.S. Social Forum in Detroit, a gathering that promises to breathe new energy and fresh ideas into the peoples' movements. The Social Forum couldn't come at a better time.

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