



Hands off Iran!

Wed, 28/02/2007 - 23:00

The US-led coalition occupying Iraq is rapidly falling apart. The much-heralded 21,500 extra troops sent in January were largely National Guard reservists. The frontline troops consist of war-weary regular soldiers, denied leave for months. A recent poll revealed that only 17 per cent of them still support the war.

Meanwhile, one by one America's allies are withdrawing. Even Britain is to withdraw 1,500 troops in April and a further 1,500 later this year, having finally relinquished its (fictional) control of southern Iraq to the Iraqi government (aka the Shia militias). The number of attacks on US, British and Iraqi government forces reached an all-time high of 186 in December.

Real threat against Iran

However the imperialists have reacted to their impending defeat with increased belligerence. British 'withdrawal' turned out to be simply redeployment, sending 1,400 extra troops to Afghanistan (see box). And the Pentagon, as revealed by Seymour Hersh in the *New Yorker*, is in the advance stages of planning a bombing mission against neighbouring Iran.

Hersh, who made his name by breaking the story of the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, has made detailed claims that the US is now capable of bombing Iranian nuclear facilities and military targets at just 24 hours notice. It has ordered two aircraft carriers to join its war fleet in the Gulf. Vice President Dick Cheney and security adviser Elliot Abrams (who was convicted in the Iran-contra affair in the 1980s) have been charged with leading the operation, and working closely with Saudi Arabia's Prince Bandar bin Sultan.

There are other signs of a coming military attack on Iran. Since August, at any one time, 500 Iranian officials have been in US custody in Iraq. The US has secured United Nations sanctions against the regime on the grounds that its uranium enrichment programme could be used to make a nuclear bomb - even though the CIA itself says that the regime is at least 10 years away from succeeding.

Echoes from the build-up to the Iraqi war are unmistakable. As Pentagon spokesman, Bryan Whitman told Hersh, 'The United States is not planning to go to war with Iran. To suggest anything to the contrary is simply wrong, misleading and mischievous.'

Anti-imperialist united front

US policy is based on the supposed fear of a Shia crescent in the Middle East, stretching from Iran, through southern and eastern Iraq and southern Lebanon to Palestine. Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi army, Hassan Nasrallah's Hezbollah and Hamas (not Shia, but Sunni) are all thrown into this ragbag 'threat.' Having resorted to the parties and militias based on Iraq's Shia population as the basis for defeating the supposed Sunni Saddam die-hards, the inevitable boost this gave to Iran's influence has made Bush turn 180 degrees. Now he is searching for Sunni forces across the whole region to help crush the threat to its dominance. According to both Hersh and former British MI6 agent Alastair Crooke, the US is even backing Sunni groups in Lebanon and Syria, like Fatah al-Islam, which even have links to al-Qa'ida.

The only thing that remains constant in all this is US and British imperialism's policy of divide and rule, in the hope of plundering the region for decades to come.

There are two mistakes that socialists and genuine anti-imperialists could make in the current situation.

The first is to refuse to support Islamist forces - Sunni or Shia - whenever they are actually fighting imperialism and its puppets - to equate the danger of Islamism with that posed by imperialism. For millions of people in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Afghanistan, imperialism and its local agent Israel are the immediate danger. Thus if Iran is attacked by the US and its allies then it is the duty of the antiwar movement worldwide to work for an Iranian victory. If any one thinks democracy will arrive on the American tanks, just look at Iraq.

The second error would be to uncritically support the Shia leadership of the resistance to US imperialism. Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad heads a brutal dictatorship. Last year, he outlawed the Tehran bus drivers' union, arrested and imprisoned its leaders, and imposed an Islamic yellow union on the workers. Earlier this month, he arrested 32 women for protesting against anti-women Islamic laws on polygamy and child custody. Student activists are constantly under threat from the fascist gangs that Ahmadinejad is close to.

Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi army has been involved in the religious-ethnic cleansing of Baghdad though he himself has denounced it and called for a purge of the militia. He has imposed the rule of Islamic courts in Sadr City with terrible consequences for women and secular forces. In Lebanon Hassan Nasrallah, for all the courage of Hizbollah's resistance to the Israelis, and his calls for an alliance with secular and socialist forces, is still a religious leader seeking a greater place for the Shia within a confessional state.

Permanent revolution

There can be no freedom for any of the peoples of the Middle East without defeating imperialism's attacks. Whoever stands aside from the resistance struggle will be - rightly - castigated as a stooge of the big capitalist powers.

This does not mean socialists should call on workers to cease their class struggle, nor on women to stop fighting for their rights against the imposition of Islamist dictatorships. It means that they should organise independently of other classes - free of religious affiliation- precisely in order to broaden the resistance to imperialism and to develop it into a struggle for social revolution. In the process, socialists will necessarily clash with their temporary allies, fighting to win over their working masses to the goal of overthrowing capitalism and spreading the socialist revolution throughout the Middle East.

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