

Prospects for the Middle East

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The war against Iraq ended in swift battlefield victory for the United States ? hardly a surprise given the shattered character of Iraq both economically and militarily. Given too the enormous global military preponderance of the USA, the open terrain of Iraq, the hatred of a majority of the Iraqi people for Saddam?s dictatorship, any other outcome was impossible. Impossible that is unless Saddam had actually possessed any usable weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Of course, he did not have such weapons and Bush and Blair knew that very well, as investigations in both the USA and Britain have revealed. Had they had any serious doubts on this they would not have launched their attack.

The majority of Iraq?s people undoubtedly wanted freedom from the repulsive Saddam regime; but they did not want to see their country subjected to months of extreme chaos and disorder. Nor did they bank on years of occupation and plunder by the United States and its accomplices.

The only genuine mass celebrations were in the Shi?a and Kurdish regions and here too what was really being celebrated was the restoration of national and religious freedoms not the presence of US troops and their British allies.

Millions of people around the world went on the streets to express their total rejection of the ?permanent war? declared by Bush and Blair. The lying pretexts given for war have evaporated before the very eyes of those millions who grudgingly went along with the war. Total military success for the United States has turned out to be a political disaster. It has made the USA passionately hated on a scale not seen since the Vietnam war.

Victory has led the USA and the British straight into the quagmire of an expensive and bloody occupation ? a result predicted by all the opponents of the war. When Bush rashly bragged about potential Iraqi resistance (?Bring ?em on?) he was courting nemesis. The US occupation forces have lost more soldiers than during the war itself and the death rate is steadily rising. Few can now deny that the US forces face a truly hostile Iraqi population and a growing guerrilla war of resistance which, whatever the character of its leadership (Ba?athist or Islamist) or its tactics (elitist and bringing repression and economic hardship on the masses) is nevertheless a justified war of national liberation.

The real reasons for the war have become all too obvious. US corporations like Bechtel and Halliburton have rushed squealing to the feeding trough. In September the US puppet Iraqi Governing Council announced a virtual sell-off of the country to the big corporations. It will allow total foreign ownership of the country?s privatised essential services. It will allow the purchasers to set prices at will and repatriate their profits in their entirety. The seizure and long term control of Iraq?s huge oil reserves is a key objective of Bush and Dick Cheney?s long term energy strategy, as was the 2001-2002 projection of US military bases into the Caspian region.

The old century was not even out before the neoconservative ideologues of the Committee for a New American Century were outlining plans for a highly interventionist military role, aimed at forcing the pace of

globalisation. Thomas Friedman, in the New York Times opined that 'for globalisation to work, America can't be afraid to act like the almighty superpower that she is.'

Events this year have proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that the 'war on terrorism', declared after 9/11 was indeed a continuation by other 'violent' means of the process of corporate capitalist globalisation.

In the military and political sphere global capitalism continues to be characterised by the absolute hegemony of US imperialism. The US accounts for nearly half the world's total military expenditure. No coalition of states dare yet form an open countervailing power to it. Years if not decades of hugely increased military spending would be needed to make this possible. The US empire is and remains for the immediate future the 'personification' of imperialism in the age of global capitalism.

The other imperialist powers (and those who wish to become such) will be obliged to resist and to challenge the US but in the next years they will do so obliquely, avoiding any head on confrontations.

Many of the first generation of anti-globalisation theorists mistakenly thought that capitalism had been 'de-nationalised' or even 'de-imperialised'. Yet it is the US state which is the central actor in world politics, not the IMF or the World Bank. These are the instruments of its economic policy, carried out in the interests of its banks and corporations. On the other hand, this most powerful empire in the history of mankind is more than ever dependent on political and economic developments in the world beyond its own continent. This is an unavoidable consequence of its corporations' expanded global reach. The USA also no longer gets the majority of its own vital oil supplies from within its own borders and it depends on massive, regular and sustained inflows of foreign capital to keep its economy buoyant.

Furthermore, capitalism is forced by low profit rates, deflation and intense competition, to claw back former concessions to the working and middle class. This applies to wage and salary levels as well as social welfare and education. This in turn forces the ruling class to resort to militarism, national chauvinism and outright racism - all combined under the slogan of 'the war against terrorism'.

Globalised capitalism - or the new imperialism as it is increasingly being called - combines a great outward show of strength and aggression, with an inner weakness and tendency to stagnation at the heart of its system of production. This is what forces US imperialism into a foreign policy of selective colonisation of key economic and strategic centres while imposing semi-colonial conditions on the rest of the world. These are conditions which it imposed for over a century in Latin America - its 'own backyard'.

The post-second world war re-division of the world gave the USA relative world dominance but excluded much of Europe, Africa and Asia from its direct hegemony. Now the US ruling class sees the possibility of extending and absolute hegemony to the whole world.

To keep this 'empire' stable it has to be expanded permanently, rather like the need of capital for expanded reproduction. Therefore the future will be marked by wars of occupation and the modern version of gunboat diplomacy to enforce an open door for US capital and compliance with the aptly named 'Washington consensus'. But each of these developments will provoke further instability. In no region is this more obvious than in the Middle East, the Arab and Islamic world.

In the USA and Britain too, opposition, partly cowed by the swift military victory, is growing again. The popularity of Bush and 'Bliar' has slumped. In Britain New Labour faces an internal crisis; Blair's leadership is even in question. Bush now faces the possibility of a serious challenge in 2004, where months ago he seemed certain of a second term. What we see both in USA and in Europe is a growing alienation of the ruling faction of the bourgeoisie from substantial sectors of the popular classes and,

secondly, a serious split within the ruling class itself. This situation will not abate in the short term because the objective reasons for it are strong and growing.

Firstly, there is a deepening socio-economic crisis rooted in globalisation. This includes the flight of jobs to cheap labour destinations (e.g. India and China), affecting the service sector as well as manufacturing. The continuing push for privatisation and cuts in social provision, the attacks on democratic rights, racist hysteria against 'economic migrants' and 'bogus asylum seekers' all contribute to this crisis.

Secondly, there is a deepening division between the imperialist powers over the Middle East today and over the prospects for a similar US policy being applied further afield. This disquiet applies not only to Iraq and Palestine, but to the threats levelled at Syria, Iran and North Korea too. Nearly all the major powers in the German-French dominated European Union, as well as Russia and China, fear the destabilising consequences of Bush and Blair's reckless militaristic drive. They resent Bush's undisguised unilateralism, his refusal to share the plunder of his wars with them, his scarcely veiled contempt for the United Nations.

A potent source of instability in the region is provided by the ongoing repression that Israel metes out to the Palestinians and the provocations it launches against its Arab neighbours. The Zionist gendarme of US imperialism in the Middle East is desperately trying to expand its territory and stabilise its power while encouraging the US to extend the direct rule of imperialism over the Middle East.

In a region of increasing social and political unrest, a long-term stable counterrevolutionary solution in a 'democratic form' is impossible. There is no possible peaceful integration of the Middle East into a single economic zone with a central/hegemonic place for Israeli capital.

Ariel Sharon wants to 'solve' the Palestinian question by crushing the main resistance to its plans - Hamas and Islamic Jihad - and to encourage the emergence of a post-Arafat Palestinian leadership which is ready to administer a series of mini-Bantustans behind an apartheid wall. As a result Washington's road map for peace, based on a 'viable' Palestinian state, is in tatters.

Together these difficulties faced by Bush make it unlikely that the USA can undertake another major adventure in the next year or so. For Blair it would be impossible. But neither are they likely to return to the multilateralism or coalition building within the UN framework that the Europeans, the Russians and the Chinese want. The reason is that the aggressive, militaristic faction of the bourgeoisie expresses most clearly and consistently the objective dynamic of global capitalism.

What are their next priorities? There are broadly speaking two strategic areas for US imperialism and its allies: the oil rich Middle East, and the huge sources of 'cheap' labour in South and East Asia. Unequal exchange and super-exploitation; these alone can provide the fuel to keep the system going. So one task is to tighten its grip over the Middle East, which means breaking any show of resistance or independence from Iran and Syria. In addition the problem of Saudi Arabia as the real financial and human reservoir for al-Qa'ida has to be tackled at some point. The other is to strengthen U.S. positions in the Far East.

What are the restraints inhibiting the United States from further adventures? First, the quagmire in Iraq. The mounting resistance of the Iraqi population stems from the inability of the occupation forces to secure even minimum standards of living or jobs for the population. The internal divisions of the Kurdish, Shi'a, and Sunni supporters of the US war are becoming increasingly obvious.

At the moment, a substantial share of the US military (137,000 soldiers) is stationed in Iraq and can not easily be directed into another action. The increasing toll of US deaths will erode the troops' morale in Iraq

and support for the occupation by the general public at home. Conflicts between the US and Turkey have increased over control of Northern Iraq and the 'threat' of a Kurdish state - the nightmare of all Turkish political leaders be they Islamists or secular nationalists. The US is unlikely to succeed in offloading any significant proportion of the tasks of the occupation onto the backs of its allies.

Second, the campaign for the November 2004 US presidential election begins in earnest in the new year. Another war without a successful resolution of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan would be seen for what it would be - an attempt to win the election with the blood of American GIs. It would - outside of another 9/11 style terrorist hit inside the USA - lead to internal and international upheavals on a far bigger scale than what we have witnessed this year.

The next year will see the warmongers on the defensive, beset by internal bickering and fearful of a resurgent anti-war and anti-imperialist movement. We must do all we can to make Washington's worst nightmares come true.

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