The Imperial Realignment of the Middle East

written by Kevin B. Anderson | May 21, 2018

US President Donald Trump's ripping up of the Iran nuclear pact, his shocking relocation of the US Embassy to Jerusalem, and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's equally shocking mass murder of peaceful Palestinian demonstrators has revealed the utter depravity of today's rulers. Despite their sometimes chaotic and reckless appearance, however, these moves amount to nothing short of a breathtaking attempt by the US, with its Israeli and Saudi allies, to realign Middle East politics by creating an uncontested hegemony for the entire region. To this end, Iran must be crushed as a rival subimperialist power, Russia and Turkey dealt in or sidelined, and both the remainder of the Arab revolutions and newly resurgent Palestinian movement repressed.

These new moves transpired in just a week, which shook up global politics in ways that go far beyond the almost daily war threats and general chaos of the Trump administration.

Three Hegemonic Moves

First, on May 8, Trump announced that he was abandoning the Iran nuclear pact, that the US would restore its harsh pre-2015 economic sanctions, and that these would be applying not only to Iran itself, but to any entity trading with Iran. This was already foretold last May when Trump visited Saudi Arabia and threatened Iran with nuclear destruction, and even earlier during his racist, Islamophobic election campaign. It remains to be seen, however, whether the European Union, Russia, and China will bow to this kind of US pressure. So far, the signs are that these other powers will resist the US, and they have some key economic cards of their own to play. They genuinely fear that Iran will resume its nuclear weapons program now that the US has backed out of the agreement and are desperately trying to hold it together in order to avert war.

However, Trump and his ultra-hawkish National Security Advisor, John Bolton, seem to have plans for Iran that go beyond merely economic pressure. Netanyahu's Israel, the only state in the region that actually has nuclear weapons, has at times seemed ready to attack Iran. The sectarian Sunni fundamentalist rulers of Saudi Arabia wish publicly nearly every day for some kind of military attack on Iran, though it is doubtful that their lavishly funded but ineffective military forces would be up to something like that. But at the very least, it seems that some kind of air campaign against Iran is being considered by Trump and Netanyahu. This could lead to confrontation in the Persian Gulf, potentially blocking a major source of oil for much of the world, as well as one between Israel and Iranian or pro-Iranian forces across its borders with Lebanon and Syria.

Second, on the morning of May 14, just six days after Trump's announcement about Iran, the mass Palestinian demonstrations against being walled in to Gaza reached their climax, with 35,000 women, children and men approaching the border in a nonviolent demonstration. In response, the Israeli armed forces escalated what they had begun on March 30, the first demonstration. This time, Israeli snipers from afar murdered no fewer than 59 people, and wounded over a thousand, including a number of medics and journalists.

Third, a few hours later on the same day, and only 40 miles away from the Gaza carnage, the ceremony Trump and Netanyahu had scheduled to mark the relocation of the US Embassy to Jerusalem took place as planned. Ivanka Trump participated in a photo op and Jared Kushner spoke insipidly about the glories of the Israeli state and the need for a solid peace plan. Among the religious figures the US invited to "sanctify" this usurpation of land that is supposed to be divided in a final peace settlement were two fundamentalist Christian ministers best known for their Islamophobic, racist, and even anti-Semitic utterances. But that was no problem for this depraved US administration, as it was a deliberate move to shore up Trump's base among evangelical Christians, who dream of Armageddon in a very specific way that entails the propping up of the existing Israeli state.

While the chaotic Trump is certainly a wild card in all this, as is the bombastic Netanyahu, there are some other wild cards that the rulers have hardly considered, among them the aspirations of the Palestinian and the Iranian people.

A New Stage of Palestinian Resistance

The Palestinian movement has been deeply divided for over a decade between the more secular nationalist Fateh movement, which controls the West Bank, and the more Islamist Hamas movement, which controls Gaza. In recent years, Hamas and other Islamist militants have fought against several Israeli invasions of Gaza, also lobbing rockets on occasion into Israel in a manner more symbolic than military, since they almost always fall short. Fateh, which controls the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, has become very discredited due to corruption and craven deals with the Israeli authorities.

During the past year, new movements have emerged from below. Last July, for example, a mass movement of Jerusalem Palestinians successfully protested in order to prevent new and more intrusive Israeli security measures around the Muslim holy places in the city.

Last December, in the wake of Trump's announcement of the relocation of the US Embassy, some young Palestinians from Gaza began a Facebook campaign for actions in spring 2018 at the Gaza-Israel border. As with the 2011 Arab revolutions, these posts went viral, as many youths joined in. Soon, thousands had committed themselves to nonviolent action at the border.

Since it began March 30, the global and especially US media have insisted on calling this a Hamas demonstration, with US media emphasizing the violence from "both sides," as if flaming kites are equivalent to snipers with assault rifles in fortified bunkers beyond the reach of the other side. (These "objective" journalists would do well to remember the 1976 Soweto demonstrations when Black teenagers and children "armed" with rocks and garbage can lids as shields were massacred by South African apartheid machine guns. Does anyone today consider this a "violent" demonstration?). In fact, the newest Gaza demonstrations mark an important change from militaristic actions of small groups in "armed struggle" against the occupier to the rebirth of a mass movement on the streets and in the fields.

Listen to the words of Ahmed Abu Ratima, whose December 9 Facebook post, "just a few days after President Trump announced he would recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel," helped touch off a mass movement at the Gaza border fence: "Still, despite the response from Israeli snipers, I continue to be committed to nonviolence, as are all of the other people 'coordinating' this march. I use quotation marks because when a movement becomes this large — attracting what we estimate to be as many as 200,000 people on Fridays — it cannot be completely controlled. We discouraged the burning of Israeli flags and the attachment of Molotov cocktails to kites. We want peaceful, *equal* coexistence to be our message" (Ahmed Abu Ratima, "I Helped Start the Gaza Protests. I Don't

Regret It," *New York Times* 5/14/18)

This kind of statement, plus the donning of Guy Fawkes masks — worn Occupy style — by a number of demonstrators, suggest a movement more akin to the Arab revolutions of 2011 than the authoritarian and militaristic politics of Hamas.

Therefore, I think it is clear that a new generation of Palestinian youth has emerged, imbued with the global spirit of twenty-first-century revolution. (That does not mean that Hamas has not, and will not in the future, try to take over the movement, as the Muslim Brotherhood did in Egypt.)

Another indicator of just how new and fundamentally progressive this movement is, and how reactionary the Israeli state has become, is seen in the kind of women protestors who have emerged. Some are intensely religious Hamas supporters, others secular leftwing feminists, but all have been in the forefront of the recent demonstrations, at the risk of their lives. Take for example Jumana Adnan Mushtaha, a journalism student who works with a committee documenting the demonstrations. She also thinks very critically about social issues within the Palestinian community: "She holds that religion, not politics, imposes the biggest obstacle to women's ambitions and aspirations: 'When I want to go out, it takes a long time to convince my parents. I begin with my mother, then she convinces my father. After 5PM, I cannot go out alone, to avoid being regarded askance, as if I'm doing something wrong.' In that case, her brother accompanies her when she takes photos" (Piotr Smolar, "A Gaza, les femmes en première ligne," *Le Monde* 5/15/18).

As for the State of Israel, listen to the retrograde sexism of Army spokesman Avichay Adraee, in a Twitter message of April 5 attacking Palestinian women demonstrators: "A good woman is one who concerns herself with her home and her children. The depraved woman bereft of honor does not concern herself with these things but acts in a wild manner at variance with her feminine nature, and cares nothing for how she is perceived by society" (Piotr Smolar, "A Gaza, les femmes en première ligne," *Le Monde* 5/15/18). While such statements are indeed shocking, they are in keeping with Israel's steady evolution toward a rightwing theocratic state. As celebrated Israeli historian Zeev Sternhell noted recently, political leaders whose formulations flirt increasingly with "a racism similar that of early Nazism" ("En Israël pousse un racisme proche du nazisme à ses débuts," *Le Monde* 2/19/18).

On May 18, five days after the massacre of May 14, thousands of Palestinians again returned to the Gaza border. While up to now the West Bank and Jerusalem have been less active on the streets, partly due to machinations by the Palestinian Authority, this could change on a dime. As veteran independent nationalist Mustapha Barghouti put it recently: "A national movement on the part of all Palestinians is possible" (Allan Kaval, "La Colère rentrée des Palestiniens de Cisjordanie," *Le Monde* 5/18/18).

Moreover, while the Palestinians are more isolated than before in terms of support from other countries in the Middle East, with Egypt and the Saudis in a virtual alliance with Israel, their popular support, not only in the region but globally, has never been higher. And this will surely grow in the wake of the latest Israeli massacres and the mass creativity exhibited by the Palestinian people.

Iran in Trump's Crosshairs

Netanyahu waited less than 48 hours after Trump pulled the US out of the nuclear agreement to bomb Iranian facilities in Syria, where the Iranian regime has unconscionably propped up the murderous Assad regime as it has slaughtered 500,000 in suppressing the revolution. But Netanyahu has zero concern for the Syrian people, any more than he has for those of the rest of the

peoples of the Middle East.

As with the Gaza massacre, the US praised Israel's air attack, but this is nothing new. Nor is Trump's bellicosity toward Iran an anomaly, as it is shared by virtually all Republican leaders and a number of mainstream Democrats as well. Recall that Obama's support for the 2015 nuclear agreement was almost voted down by the Senate, with some liberals like present Democratic Minority Leader Chuck Schumer joining Republicans in an attempt to scuttle it.

But with Trump's appointment of Bolton as National Security Adviser, things seem to have gone beyond rhetoric and posturing, to an actual threat of war against Iran. In Bolton, we now have a fanatical militarist as the closest person besides Trump to the nuclear button. Bolton is particularly close to the Mujahideen-e-Khalq or *MEK, a once-revolutionary Iranian group that operates in a cult like fashion and which sided with Saddam Hussein during the 1980s Iraq War, and since then with the US and Israel. Bolton and Trump seem think they can make the MEK a vehicle of "regime change" inside Iran. On its face, this strains credulity, but we have seen stranger things happen before, for example during Bush's invasion of Iraq.*

Inside Iran, the economy has taken a dive with the collapse of the currency in April, possibly in anticipation of the end of the nuclear agreement and a return to severe economic sanctions. Iran has also experienced considerable internal, class-based unrest this year, most notably the January uprising in impoverished rural areas. Labor unrest has broken out again at the Haft Tapeh sugar factory, a frequent site of strikes and protests over unpaid wages in the past.

But this spring, the labor actions seem larger and more determined. As Asa Fitch summed it up for the *Wall Street Journal* on May 6, "Teachers went on strike in central Iran's city of Yazd. Steelworkers and hospital staff walked off the job in the southwest city of Ahvaz. Railway employees protested near Tabriz. And a bus driver's union in Tehran battled the private companies that control many city routes." In addition, a group of Iranian labor activists inside the country and their supporters issued a widely circulated May Day statement calling for a nationwide labor organization independent of the state: https://www.imhojournal.org/articles/may-day-call-from-inside-iran/

Some of this year's popular protests have also targeted Iran's subimperialist involvement in Syria and Lebanon, and the untold economic cost of such actions in faraway lands.

We have also seen increasingly bold women's protests against compulsory hijab (headscarves). A succession of young women has publicly unveiled, accepting arrest and imprisonment, with massive sympathetic coverage in social media.

But *Wall Street Journal* readers should not delude themselves that Iran is ready for US-style "regime change." This was tried once before, in 1980, when the US and some European powers encouraged Iraq's Saddam Hussein to invade the new Islamic Republic of Iran. This resulted in a tragic nine-year war that killed hundreds of thousands on both sides and allowed the Iranian regime to consolidate itself in the face of strong leftist opposition. Times today are certainly different, but the myopia of US war hawks remains just as dangerous.

What we do face today from Trump, Netanyahu, and the Saudis, is the real danger of another largescale war in the Middle East. This is the case more than at any time since Bush's Iraq War was being prepared in 2002. An imperialist war against Iran, a much larger country than Iraq and with allied militias all the way from Iraq to Syria and Lebanon, would be a disaster for all concerned. It could easily involve both the Persian Gulf and the Eastern Mediterranean, with a level of destructiveness far beyond any Middle East war up to now. Even so-called "limited" airstrikes could spiral out of control.

We need to mobilize all our forces to stave off these war threats, without in any way lending support to the Iranian regime itself. It is a hard needle to thread, but a most necessary one, as we need to support the revolutionary and democratic aspirations of the peoples of the region — Palestinians, Iranians, Syrians, Kurds, and others — at the same time that we oppose all forms of imperialism.