

The Antiwar Movement and Iraq

March 8, 2010

THE ANTIWAR MOVEMENT NEEDS to demand the immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops and an end to the U.S. domination of Iraq, not because we don't care about Iraqis, but precisely because we do care. And while we support any people's right to resistance, we should not "support the Iraq resistance."

Out Now!

RATHER THAN PROTECTING Iraqi civilians, U.S. armed forces have shown themselves to be the main danger to Iraqi civilians. According to the Iraqi Health Ministry, operations by U.S. and allied forces have been killing twice as many Iraqis — most of them civilians — as attacks by insurgents (Nancy A. Youssef, Knight Ridder, 9/25/04).

But even without this extreme brutality and the humiliations of Abu Ghraib, the U.S. presence would provoke Iraqi hostility. Why? Because no people like foreign occupation. It is the U.S. determination to control Iraq — militarily, economically, and politically — that incites many Iraqis to take up arms. And there is every reason to believe that the insurgency would be much reduced if U.S. troops were to withdraw. For example, the Association of Muslim Scholars, the leading Sunni religious group, with ties to the resistance, has declared that if a date were set for withdrawal it would issue a fatwa against anyone continuing the insurgency (Steve Negus, *Financial Times*, 2/7/05).

And ending the occupation is consistent with the views of the Iraqi people. One indicator is a January Zogby poll that showed 82 percent of Sunni Arabs and 69 percent of Shiites favoring U.S. withdrawal "either immediately or after an elected government is in place."

It is essential that the antiwar movement call for *complete* U.S. withdrawal. United States troops are, of course, the main impediment to Iraqi sovereignty, but they aren't the only impediment. Washington has used the occupation to establish all sorts of instruments of control that could last even if the troops were pulled out. There are the military bases, the economic decrees imposed by former U.S. pro-consul Paul Bremer, the sweetheart contracts signed with U.S. and other favored firms, the bureaucrats with multiyear terms appointed by Bremer. The bases must be dismantled, the decrees abrogated, the contracts and appointees made revocable and removable at Iraqi discretion.

And Washington must contribute funds for the reconstruction of Iraq — but without U.S. control. This demand is critical because it reflects simple justice and because it is important for the antiwar movement to distinguish itself from those who oppose the occupation simply because it costs too much to Americans. It *does* cost too much to Americans, but this isn't the only, or even the main reason, to oppose it.

Support "the Resistance"?

SOME SUGGEST THAT there's one other position that the antiwar movement ought to take: namely, "support the resistance." It's not entirely clear what this means, but in any event the position of blanket support for the resistance is extremely ill- advised.

The basic argument advanced for supporting the resistance in Iraq is that as a general principle

we should always support those who are fighting against U.S. imperialism (e.g., Sharon Smith, *Socialist Worker*, 1/21/05; Paul D'Amato, *International Socialist Review*, March/April 2005). But to give our automatic support to any opponent of U.S. imperialism means we should have supported the Taliban in 2001 or Saddam Hussein in 2003. One can oppose the U.S. wars in Afghanistan or Iraq without having to support those governments that the United States was attacking. And actually, those who have struck the "strongest blows" against U.S. imperialism — on its home soil — are al-Qaeda and Timothy McVeigh. Do we support them?

But don't people have the right to resist foreign occupation? Of course they do, just as people have many other abstract rights that don't require us to support all those who are entitled to these rights. Did the people of Cambodia have the right to oppose U.S. intervention? Certainly. Did we therefore have to support the Khmer Rouge? Of course not.

Am I arguing that we should only support movements that are perfect, that hold exactly all the right views on every question? Of course not. Oppressed people are constrained in their choices and we have to sympathize with people's far-from-optimal conditions. But this doesn't mean that we must give carte blanche to anything that oppressed people do. The German people were suffering during the depression, but we didn't use this to excuse Nazism. So of course we shouldn't insist that a movement needs to be perfect in terms of tactics or politics for us to support it; but nor should we say that our support is automatic no matter how horrible the movement's tactics or politics may be.

Does failing to "support the resistance" mean that we oppose self-determination? On the contrary. We should avoid blanket endorsement of every resistance movement precisely because we care about self-determination. Movements that want to impose ruthless dictatorships over a population are not movements for self-determination — by definition. To be sure, Washington doesn't represent or care about self-determination. But we can't simply assume that anyone fighting the United States is automatically on the side of self-determination.

So which resistance movements should we not support?

In terms of tactics, there are some things that are morally unacceptable, particularly attacks on innocent civilians. Now we shouldn't condemn an entire movement because a small number of its members, acting on their own, perhaps under traumatic conditions, violate these principles. But when a government or movement uses such tactics in a systematic, large-scale, calculated way, that government or movement must be condemned.

In terms of political program, I have supported many groups whose program I do not agree with. For example, the anti-Marcos movement in the Philippines included many people in its leadership who had terrible positions on women's reproductive rights. But here's the crucial point: while these people when in power did enact regressive policies, they didn't ban all debate on the subject. That is, the broadly bourgeois democratic framework they established left the question of women's rights, union rights, and many other issues up to democratic contestation. That's very different from a movement that has as its de facto program the stifling of all debate, the squashing of all democratic opposition. The former has democratic and progressive potential even if it has regressive politics in some respects. The latter has no such potential.

What about the particular Iraqi case? Should we "support the resistance" in Iraq?

Of the many assertions as to the nature of the resistance, the only thing that seems certain is that the resistance includes many different elements. There are Baathists, ex-Baathists, extreme Islamic fundamentalists, foreign jihadists, nationalists of various stripes, and people simply enraged by U.S. behavior — but there is no convincing information as to their relative weight or degree of

control. We needn't accept the official U.S. view that the resistance is entirely made up of unsavory thugs, but nor should we reflexively assume that the opposite is the case and that such elements are not a significant part of the resistance. Accordingly, refraining from any definitive characterization of the resistance as a whole seems the wisest course of action.

An approach that seems to me far more defensible morally and politically than offering blanket endorsement to "the resistance" is to say that we support the right of the Iraqi people to engage in resistance, whether armed or unarmed, by all legitimate means, and condemn acts of terrorism targeting innocent civilians, especially sectarian attacks. Moreover, we support any forces, armed or unarmed, that are fighting for the liberation of Iraq and to achieve a democratic and progressive outcome, and we withhold our support from those whose tactics are systematically unacceptable and from those who would impose a rigid dictatorship — whether secular or Islamic — over the Iraqi people.

Some will say that Westerners have no right to lecture the Iraqi resistance on what tactics are acceptable. The implication here is that Western progressives are trying to impose their will on Iraqis. But those of us who call for U.S. withdrawal from Iraq are obviously not calling for the United States to impose its will on anyone. Those who urge us to "support the resistance" aren't just calling for us to get the United States out; they are calling for us to make an affirmative statement of support for certain Iraqis and they want us to give this endorsement automatically, without considering what it is we are endorsing, merely by virtue of the fact that these Iraqis oppose the United States.

IN FACT, DISTINGUISHING between legitimate and illegitimate means isn't a Western concoction, but a view widely shared in Iraq. In mid-February, a group of "anti-occupation patriotic forces" issued a statement making just this distinction (see Gilbert Achcar, "Iraq Developments, ZNet, 3/4/05), and in March, a cleric at the main Sunni mosque in Baghdad condemned attacks on civilians, telling worshippers "Everybody should speak out against such inhumane acts" (Sameer N. Yacoub, Associated Press, 3/4/05). For Western antiwar activists to fail to join in condemning such tactics, and to offer instead blanket support for the resistance, can only discredit the peace movement.

Likewise, there are Iraqi social or political forces that have been pushing a progressive political agenda, whether for workers' rights or women's rights. They reject the U.S. occupation, and oppose Islamic fundamentalism at the same time. When they are threatened by some armed groups claiming to belong to "the resistance," shouldn't we be defending them and condemning those that would crush them?

The argument against undifferentiated support for "the resistance" is practical as well as moral. What credibility will we have in defending Muslims and Arabs in the United States from repression on the grounds that "they are all terrorists," when we are unable to criticize any terrorism at all when it's committed by Iraqis? And what success will we have in aiding the building of an antiwar movement within the military if we refuse to condemn those who attack mosques and marketplaces?

Our task is to get U.S. troops out of Iraq. Taking a position of supporting the resistance is not only morally and politically wrong, but it makes our main task all the more difficult.

Footnotes