

Middle East still at war: the US is losing but the winners are unclear

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Global Research, August 21, 2008

Institute for Policy Studies, 29 May 2008

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Phyllis Bennis will be a guest on the [Global Research News Hour on RBN, Monday August 25, 2008](#)

In a period of rapid decline of American power around the world, the danger of choosing military force to assert US global reach becomes more, not less likely, and nowhere is that more clear than in the Middle East.

This is a period of rapid and dramatic decline of American economic power around the world, and that, along with massive anger directed at U.S. policies around the world, has resulted in a precipitous drop in U.S. diplomatic and political influence. As a result, for those committed to maintaining Washington's superpower status, choosing military force to assert U.S. global reach becomes more, not less likely. Forcing a real end to the U.S. occupation of Iraq is more difficult than ever. U.S. military support to Israel is higher than ever. And the danger of a U.S. military strike on Iran remains as high as ever.

Despite and because of its huge military presence and the continuing horror of the occupation and war in Iraq, there is no question that Washington has lost significant influence in the Middle East. U.S. efforts to dominate and control the region's governments, resources, and people are failing. U.S.-backed governments and movements across the Middle East are rejecting the Bush administration's demand that they isolate, sanction, and threaten the other governments and movements that Washington deems the bad guys - those linked to Iran. Instead the U.S.-backed governments are themselves launching new bi-, tri-, and multi-lateral negotiations with "the bad guys" outside of U.S. control, and often in direct contradiction to U.S. wishes.

The Bush administration is making rosy-eyed claims that the Arab world is unified behind its anti-Iran campaign. One of the White House spin shops last week bragged about "growing agreement among regional leaders regarding Iran's challenge to peace and security." But in fact, the Middle East is far from unified behind White House positions, and the U.S. is losing. U.S. allies are refusing to toe Washington's dangerous line of "no negotiations with anyone we say is a bad guy."

From Baghdad to Beirut, from Ramallah to Ankara and Cairo to Tel Aviv, U.S.-backed governments are talking to, even signing agreements with those Washington loves to hate - those allied with Iran. The occupation-backed Iraqi government is rebuffing the Bush administration's anti-Iran crusade. The Gulf Cooperation Council - the Saudi-led union of pro-U.S. Arab petro-states - welcomed Iran as a neighboring participant and potential trading partner at their annual meeting last month. The pro-U.S. Palestinian Authority in

Ramallah is engaged in backroom unity talks with Hamas, and Israel is quietly negotiating a ceasefire with Hamas, with both processes led by the U.S.-backed government of Egypt. The U.S.-backed government in Beirut just signed a formal agreement with the elected Hezbollah-led parliamentary opposition, giving Hezbollah significant new power and allowing the election of a new president not known for pro-U.S. views. Bush's high-profile "talking equals appeasement" speech in the Israeli Knesset failed to persuade Tel Aviv not to talk to Syria, and Turkey announced it has been hosting Syrian-Israeli negotiations. One unnamed Bush administration official called the new peace talks "a slap in the face."

The impact of all these developments remains uncertain. Some of these new initiatives may fail, and some (particularly the current version of an Israeli-Syrian rapprochement) may create serious dangers even if they succeed. But what is clear is that it hasn't been a good season for the war buffs of the Bush administration. Perhaps in response to this increasingly public Middle East repudiation of the U.S. "isolate Iran" strategy, some key Bush administration officials are for the moment backpedaling away from some of their earlier rhetoric. Even as Hillary Clinton speaks of "obliterating" Iran (presumably including its 70 million people), Bush's favorite general David Petraeus now claims that in dealing with Iran, he favors diplomacy as a first choice. At least for the moment.

So we have to figure out how to build on the changing discourse, understand the still-rising dangers, and turn the work of the anti-war movement to the strategic task of transforming anti-war public opinion into real anti-war policy.

On Iran - softening the rhetoric - for the moment

Largely because of last December's publication of the national Intelligence Estimate stating that Iran did not have a nuclear weapon or a nuclear weapons program and was not even necessarily interested in building one, anti-Iran rhetoric has been rapidly shifting from Iran-is-building-a-nuclear-bomb to Iran-is-killing-U.S.-troops-in-Iraq-by-arming-militias. Weeks ago the Pentagon claimed it was about to go public to show stashes of weapons allegedly captured in Karbala and from Moqtada al Sadr's forces in Basra earlier this year. Those weapons were supposedly produced in Iran, thus allegedly "proving" Iranian support for Iraqi militias - but instead the whole propaganda effort collapsed when U.S. inspectors said none of the weapons or ammunition could actually be traced to Iran. As Gareth Porter described it, the effort was aimed at "breaking down Congressional and public resistance to the idea that Iranian bases supporting the meddling would have to be attacked." But the effort failed. The Baghdad press briefing was cancelled. At around the same time, the U.S.-backed Iraqi prime minister Nuri al Maliki sent his own delegation to Iran to discuss "evidence" provided to the Iraqi government by the U.S. about Iranian "meddling" in Iraq. The delegation returned to Baghdad, quietly, and the Iraqi government announced it was creating its own investigation. Furious with the Maliki government's refusal to join its anti-Iran crusade, one U.S. official told the Los Angeles Times, "we were blindsided by this."

And now two influential 'realist' figures - Zbigniew Brzezinski and General William Odom, writing in the Washington Post have called for an end to the current Bush policy of small carrots and heavy sticks which, they say "may work with donkeys but not with serious countries." The U.S., they say, would do better "if the White House abandoned its threats of military action and its calls for regime change."

- But changing discourse and winning broad public opposition to the Bush strategy of

endless war in the Middle East, does not yet mean an end to the danger.

As we have seen with the Iraq war, even massive shifts in public opinion do not inevitably change policy: even 70% U.S. public opposition to the war has not translated into a shift in policy to actually end the war and occupation.

On Iraq - the discourse and the Congress

The House of Representatives' recent "no" vote on the supplemental war bill, defeating Bush's request for \$168 billion for funding the Iraq and Afghanistan wars for more than another year, clearly reflected the anti-war movement's success (along with the effect of continuing U.S. military casualties and continued U.S. failure) in transforming public discourse on the war. Aside from partisan posturing, there is no way that 149 Democrats would risk actually voting against the war funding unless they could count on public opinion being against the war and in favor of Congress refusing to pay for it. We have created a new reality - in which the political price for supporting the war is higher than for opposing the war. And now even the majority of Democrats aren't willing to pay that higher price.

Whatever the intentions of war-mongering Republicans or the opportunistic Democratic leadership, and even if the decision is overturned later, the vote simultaneously reflected and enhanced the political legitimacy of a clear anti-war position. For the anti-war movement, it was a huge victory, bringing to fruition - even if only temporarily - at least half of the goal articulated by AFSC's slogan "not one more death, not one more dollar."

Israel Talks - to isolate Iran? But occupations continue

The new Israeli-Syrian negotiations, and Israel's unofficial talks with Hamas stand in direct defiance of Bush's Knesset speech less than two weeks ago in which he equated "negotiations with the terrorists and radicals" and World War II-era appeasement of Hitler. As the New York Times described it, Israel has become "the latest example of a country that has decided it is better to deal with its foes than to ignore them."

Certainly talking is better than not talking. But not all talking is serious, and motivations must be considered as well. Prime Minister Olmert is under investigation for bribery, and may soon be indicted. He has pledged to step down from his position if he is charged, but in the meantime he is opening and announcing new "diplomatic initiatives" at a furious pace, presumably at least partly to pressure prosecutors not to risk Israel's claimed national interests by forcing him to resign.

Israel - Syria

The necessary terms for ending the Israeli-Syrian conflict have been clear for many years: Israel would have to return all the occupied territory of the Golan Heights to Syria, in return for a full peace treaty between the two countries.

But there is no indication Israel is prepared to relinquish its longstanding insistence on keeping full control of the Sea of Galilee, permanently preventing Syria from accessing what should be its fair share of the strategic water reserves. Seizing and maintaining control of water resources in the largely arid region has long been a major goal of Israel's occupations, including that of the Golan Heights. (In south Lebanon, Israel's desire to access the water of the Litani River led to more than 20 years of occupation, and the apartheid wall currently snaking through the West Bank was built with all the major Palestinian aquifers on the Israeli

side of the barrier.)

Certainly Olmert has strategic goals regarding Syria, beyond concerns about his own political future. Israel is trying to pull Syria away from Iran, its strategic ally, with the aim of further isolating Tehran. Israel is trying to force a broad shift in Syria's regional role, almost certainly demanding that Syria abandon its longstanding support for Hamas and Hezbollah as part of the price for a peace deal with Israel. The White House opposes Israel's talks with Syria overall, but some in the administration share the goal of splitting Syria from Iran – including some from both sides of the administration's ideological fault line. Some of the realists who would prefer not to expand the current disastrous wars in the Middle East to Iran may favor an Israeli-Syrian rapprochement as a means of lowering tensions, while some of the reckless war-mongers who remain eager to launch military strikes against Iran may see such an arrangement as easing the way for a glorious new war. Syria would have to decide that a partial agreement with Israel, plus the chance of being removed from the U.S. terrorism list, is worth abandoning its most reliable ally. Possible, but a risky challenge for the weak Damascus leadership.

Further, despite its appearance of independence, NATO member and EU-wannabe Turkey is unlikely to engage in serious diplomacy in direct defiance of Bush's dictates. And influential voices in the White House continue to say no. Bush's top Middle East adviser, Elliott Abrams (the same who was convicted of lying to Congress during the Iran-Contra scandal of the 1980s) is leading the White House opposition by claiming talks with Israel would "reward" Syria. So a serious Israeli-Syrian breakthrough seems unlikely in the short term.

Israel - Palestine

The Israeli-Hamas talks being held under Egyptian auspices despite U.S. opposition, are desperately needed. Ending Israel's criminal blockade of Gaza, that has led to such a drastic humanitarian crisis for 1.7 million Palestinians, is crucial for saving Palestinian lives, as well as for any hope of rebuilding Gaza's shattered society. Such a step, along with a mutual ceasefire in and from Gaza, could dramatically reduce violence in the area. But so far there is little reason for optimism. Bush's continuing policy of boycott and isolation of Hamas, means that any European or other support for talks with Hamas will be very limited. There will be little real international governmental pressure on Olmert to negotiate seriously for a ceasefire and ending the blockade, let alone for a real end to Israel's occupation and apartheid policies, and without that, Olmert has little incentive to change his government's policies. That is why the international campaign of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) remains so crucial as an alternative means of pressure.

Another set of talks is also continuing – this time with U.S. support – between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA), ostensibly over long-term "two-state" goals. But those talks are largely a place-holder, with both Olmert and Abbas politically weakened, and with the U.S. undermining any serious talks by continuing to support Israeli annexation of huge blocs of territory and Israel's denial of the right of return. While those talks go on, the living conditions of Palestinians in the occupied territories continue to deteriorate. The UNRWA director in Gaza called the humanitarian crisis in Gaza "shocking and shameful" – and noted that the agency faces a \$117 million funding shortfall.

Lebanon agreement ends fighting but...

Lebanon's U.S.-backed government and the Hezbollah-led opposition finally signed an

agreement ending 18 months of political stalemate. The agreement marked a significant victory for Hezbollah – giving it a veto over government decisions, and allowing its military wing to keep its arms. This means defeat of the U.S. effort to maintain control of Lebanon by isolating Hezbollah, disarming it and eliminating it as a political force. But it also means that Lebanon’s confessional political system, imposed under French colonial rule, remains in place. It is a system based on keeping the population divided by religion and sect, making national unity virtually impossible, and making future tensions and instability virtually inevitable – probably as early as next summer’s elections. In the meantime Hezbollah remains more influential than ever – a scenario fraught with its own contradictions.

Iraq - on the ground

The fighting in Sadr City between the Mahdi Army militia led by Moqtada al-Sadr, and the U.S. occupation-backed Iraqi Army, has at least temporarily subsided. But the relative calm is likely to be short-lived, as neither military force was militarily defeated and the issues of occupation and disparities of power remain unresolved. The Mahdi fighters simply stopped fighting at a certain point, and whether they remain in the city, or have regrouped somewhere else, remains uncertain. Sadr City, like much of the rest of Baghdad, is now characterized by high cement walls newly built by U.S. and Iraqi Army troops that divide the city into tiny enclaves. As one NPR reporter described Baghdad today, the city remains perhaps the most militarized city in the world, where one cannot move more than 100 yards before encountering a military checkpoint.

In Iraq, this is what democracy looks like.

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