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Richard Greeman

# Contextualizing the Threat of Radical Islam (3)

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### The Contradictions of Empire

As we have seen, Anglo-American domination of the oil-rich Middle-East based on Moslem disunity exacerbated by insidious divide-and-rule tactics and punctuated by occasional invasions or coups d'état, brought relative stability to the region for the better part of the 20th Century. It took the born-again genius of Bush II and the Republican Right to invade an already helpless Iraq in 2001, wreck the infrastructure, turn power over to the pro-Iranian Shiites, tip the regional balance of power in favor of Iran, and successfully destabilize the whole Middle East. After eight years stuck in the Bush administration's deepening military quagmires, the U.S. elected centrist Democratic policy wonk on an implied promise of peace. Once elected, however, Bush's Democratic successor enlisted in the U.S. Middle-East March of Folly. As we have seen, President Obama has escalated the hopeless war in Afghanistan, further destabilized regimes teetering on the brink of civil war in both Yemen and nuclear-armed Pakistan, and employed terror tactics guaranteed to antagonize the populations of the entire Moslem ME/A world — all the while talking about 'winning their hearts and minds.' Moreover, unlike the case of Dubya, we cannot attribute Barack's irrational Pursuit of Policies Contrary to Self-Interest and self-willed ignorance of consequences to an obvious personality disorder.

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The danger today is not only that the Obama Administration might ignite a nuclear war in West Asia but also that its escalation of Bush's War on Terror might provoke a domestic crisis fatal to U.S. democracy as well. To illustrate the danger, allow me to compare today's Middle-East crisis with the war in Vietnam. As a campus activist, I was one of the earliest (1961) critics of U.S. intervention in Vietnam — thanks to my familiarity with France's earlier defeats in Indochina and Algeria. I was also active during the scary Berlin crisis and the terrifying nuclear showdown over Russian missiles in Cuba, and believe me I was scared. Yet today at the age of seventy I am appalled to confess I consider Bush-Obama's March of Folly in the Middle-East more dangerous still.

Back in the sixties, Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon had a tacit agreement with Khrushchev and his successors to contain these regional conflicts, to fight each other mainly through proxies, above all not to go nuclear. Today, President Obama has no way of foreseeing who will have his hand on the Pakistani nuclear trigger a year from now. Unstable Pakistan has a history of political assassinations and military coups. The Pakistani governments harbors Islamic fundamentalists in its intelligence/security apparatus and unleashes them against regional rivals like India and India's ally Afghanistan. A recent Taliban offensive within Pakistan came close to threatening the capital before the military intervened, at U.S. insistence, perpetrating a bloodbath and a humanitarian nightmare. Meanwhile the father of the Pakistani atom bomb, although convicted of selling nukes to the North Koreans, remains at large and influential. Paradoxically, the U.S. and the U.N. Security Council express hysterical concern over nuclear reactors in Iran that *might* produce enough weapons-grade Uranium to build a bomb, but no one seems excessively concerned about the nuclear canons loose on the pitching Mid-East deck in the form combat-ready Israeli, Indian and Pakistani A-bombs.

Further, thanks to the pioneering Civil Rights and Black Power movements, there was political space for protest in the streets in the sixties, and the media were compelled to pay attention to the anti-Vietnam-war movement. Our teach-ins, mass demonstrations, acts of civil disobedience and military insubordination thus played a generally-recognized historical role in ending the Vietnam war. Perversely, this victory for democracy and sanity over murderous Folly has been stigmatized as 'the Vietnam Syndrome' — as if our protests were the disease, not the cure. This bogus label allows today's pundits to dismiss out of hand the obvious comparison between the military follies of Iraq/Afghanistan and those of Vietnam. And so I wonder if such a successful anti-war movement is still possible in the U.S. today. Alas, the Pentagon and its allies learned the perverse lesson of the 'Vietnam Syndrome' all too well: In order to pursue imperialist aggression abroad, personal liberties and the right to free speech, free assembly and political organization must be curtailed at home.

The U.S. national security state has long been preparing for a preventive or pre-emptive counter-revolution. Police and other security forces have been super-armed with tasers, water-cannons, percussion grenades, tear-gas, and lethal riot-weapons. Protected behind armored vests, plastic shields and Darth Vader helmets, trained in violent riot-control methods the forces of repression stand ready and eager to crush any suspicious gathering of hippies, weirdos, feminazis, gays, tree-huggers, peaceniks and other government-designated 'terrorist suspects'. Today's protestors are often confined to 'Free Speech Areas' enclosed by chain-link fences and established far from the targeted event and attendant media. There, we are free to march in circles carrying signs and chanting slogans to each other. This reminds me of the old philosopher's paradox: 'If a free speech is emitted in the forest and nobody hears it, does it exist?' Worse still, today's peace activists and indy journalists are routinely subject to groundless arrest, warrantless searches, seizure of their computers, cameras, and poster-making equipment before they can even get their protests off the ground. The same thing happens to community and environmental activists, like the ones who were rounded up in Pittsburgh before the 2009 economic summit even began. Apparently, the Establishment — never hospitable to whistle-blowers — is bent on removing the democratic safety-valve that during the sixties shrieked loudly enough to prevent the U.S. from going all the way down the Road to Folly in Vietnam.

It doesn't take a rocket-scientist to see that today's American-led March of Folly in the Middle East, by attempting to impose imperialist hegemony through military power alone, will inevitably lead to catastrophic U.S. defeats if not to generalized catastrophe. But what other alternatives do the rulers of what some call the 'Empire' really have? Democracy? If we return to the comparison between the Middle East and Latin America, we see that the main threat to U.S. imperial interests south of the border is not reactionary nationalism but a sudden outbreak of democracy after decades of U.S.-backed dictatorships. This return to relative democracy was based on the growth of powerful social movements among the poor as well as burgeoning national economies. Today, Latin American regional trade groups openly challenge U.S. hemispheric hegemony and invite Chinese and other foreign capitalists into Uncle Sam's 'back yard,' ending the two centuries-old Yankee sphere of influence.

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This loss may be partially a consequence of the U.S. fixation on the Mid-East over the past decades: when the cat's away the mice will play. In any case, the Genie of democracy is out of the Latin American bottle now, and the over-extended U.S. military no longer has the power to stuff it back in. Unfortunately, the lesson for the Middle-East, that has Washington apparently drawn from this historic hemispheric defeat, is this: *'No more Mr. Nice-Guy. At the slightest sign of independence or weakness on the part of a client government, go for 'regime change' and install a more compliant or more repressive one. Let's talk about 'nation-building,' 'winning hearts and minds' and 'development,' but keep control by spending on military equipment, mercenaries, bribes to enemy combatants and alliances with war-lords and drug-lords — like we did in Vietnam, which we could have won if we kept our nerve!'*

Of course this blind militarism won't work in the ME anymore than it did in Vietnam, but it is the logical consequence of the basic contradiction of capitalist imperialism since the end of the first imperialist World War and the revolutionary wave that followed it in 1917-21 — the contradiction between imperialism and democracy. Although parliamentary democracy was the ideal political form for the establishment of bourgeois-capitalist rule in the 19th Century, allowing as it does for the interplay of various propertied interests, during the 20th Century's revolutionary crises it became necessary to replace it with dictatorship through 'preventive counter-revolution.' This is precisely the historical role played by the various forms of what are properly called 'fascist' movements, beginning with Mussolini's March on Rome after striking Italian workers occupied their factories in 1919-1920. It includes the Catholic clerico-fascism of the Iberian dictators Franco and Salazar and of course Nazi-fascism under Hitler, who sent German trade-unionists, socialists and communists to the concentration camps years before he sent the Jews.

All these fascist movements were broadly supported by the propertied ruling classes in the capitalist democracies. The U.S., France and Britain didn't just appease Hitler after he took power. From the twenties on as the Depression and the social crisis deepened in Europe, the democracies both openly and surreptitiously supported European fascist movements as a foil against Socialism, Communism, and plain old democracy. In 1936, they backed Franco's

falangist rebels against the legitimate government of Republican Spain. [1] But playing with fascism is like playing with fire, because fascism is both a fanatical racial/religious ideology and an expression of exacerbated nationalism. To survive, German and Italian fascism required an expansionist, aggressive type of regime, projecting each nation's inner crisis outward. The Western capitalist democracies thought they were clever, fighting fire with fire. They had second thoughts when the upstart Hitler conquered continental Europe and threatened island Britain. The irony of the anti-Iraqi 1991 Coalition painting a puny peanut like Saddam Hussein as a 'second Hitler' is that both Hitlers were nurtured by the Western democracies before they got too big for their britches.

Having played the Sorcerer's Apprentice for too long, U.S. imperialism is now dependent on little Hitlers around the globe any of whom might at any moment go 'rogue' or switch sides in what is now a multi-lateral world. Of course, no conceivable coalition of rival regional imperialisms (ie. China, Russia, the European Union or even all combined) have the military or financial might to challenge the U.S. super-power militarily. Yet America with its hollowed-out economy may once again prove to be the 'helpless giant' it was in Vietnam. Despite Wall Street's artificial recovery, the Great Recession of 2008 has left Main Street in a deepening depression. In the wake of mass disillusion over Obama's unredeemed promises of 'change' and a renewal of virulence on the racist, religious Right, the U.S. stands polarized as never before. What is most to be feared is that America itself may undergo a preventive counter-revolution under the pressure of democratic imperialism's contradictions and succumb to our own brand of fascism. The demise of the world's first democracy, Athens, as a result of the contradiction between Athenian democracy her imperialist expansionism, was theorized by Thucydides in his 5th Century B.C. *History of the War Between Athens and Sparta*. Thucydides, a former general, claimed that his History was 'written in bronze' because given human nature and similar circumstances in the future, one could expect the same results.

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Before concluding this cursory survey of a complex crisis, we must ask where Israel fits into the picture ? I have always seen Zionism as a Hebrew remake of the American frontier movie transposed to Palestine, with the Arabs in the rôle of the Indians: a matzoh-ball Western called 'How the East Was Won.' Like the courageous Euro-American colonists occupying an 'empty' American continent, the Zionists fulfilled their own Manifest Destiny in an 'empty' Palestine. The Zionist settlers saw themselves as 'a people without land in a land without people,' creating a City on the Hill in the wilderness, making the desert bloom. The necessary ethnic cleansing was carried out by the same John Wayne methods : First encourage peaceful settlers to take over the natives' land ; then when the natives fight back and some settlers get killed, holler 'atrocities' and send in the Cavalry to exterminate the savages or drive them into camps and barren reservations to rot in idleness. When necessary, negotiate treaties you have no intention of keeping. Above all, demonize the natives so as to prevent poor or disaffected settlers from fraternizing or running off with them. Soon the only 'good' Indian or Arab becomes the 'dead' Indian or Arab.

To me the tragedy of both the Jewish and Arab peoples is to be led by violent, corrupt, reactionary, religiously-inspired ultra-nationalist leaders who more and more resemble their opposite numbers and whose reciprocal power depends on mutually maintaining a state of crisis so as to silence internal opposition. I think the term 'clerico-fascism,' applied above to Iranian Islamism and Franco's Phalange, is a useful way of describing these movements and regimes. It is more general (and less biased) than the ideological formulation 'Islamofascism,' since it illuminates the symmetrical threats to peace and democracy posed by Zionist Judeo-fascism and the Christo-fascism of the Religious Right in the U.S. I can only conclude that the most urgent 'Islamic threat' on the horizon is probably the threat that America's irrational Crusade against Islamofascism will explode into nuclear war or seal the doom of democracy in the U.S.

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### What Is To Be Done?

Can this vicious cycle of 'democratic' imperialism leading to fascism be broken? Only, perhaps, through the emergence of powerful planet-wide social movements of oppressed women, peasant farmers, idealistic youth,

indigenous peoples and discriminated minorities. Only such movements from below, combined with global general strikes of salaried and waged workers against global capitalist corporations, have the potential to actually change the system before time runs out for the planet. [2] As we have learned from our disappointment with Obama's Democrats (as well as Blair's New Labour and France's Socialists) changing the personalities and parties in power has become a useless diversion. How then to promote such a solution? We can begin 'thinking globally and acting locally' by forging people-to-people links of solidarity with the democratic forces – mostly invisible in the media — struggling to emerge in the nominally Moslem ME/A world.

There can be no 'solutions' to the Middle East crisis under capitalist imperialism with its unquenchable thirst for oil — only continuously escalating wars and more barbaric depredations with the possibility of nuclear war or a preventive U.S. counter-revolution on the horizon. Islamism is only a symptom, not the cause of the disease. But this does not mean that we should stand aside paralyzed or support, out of desperation, the Islamic 'resistance' to Western imperialism as some wayward Leftists have done, forgetting that the main enemy is always at home. Nor is it useful to declare 'a plague on both your houses' while waiting for capitalism's collapse and the hypothetical world revolution which we devoutly desire. Rather, our place is along side of the civilians like ourselves who live in the 'Moslem' ME/A: teachers, students, health-care professionals, office and factory workers, trade-unionists, civil servants, and homemakers, women and men, gay and straight, struggling for their rights against the double terrorism of G.I.'s breaking down their doors and Islamicists blowing up their markets. Some examples:

In Pakistan, the civilian population is currently under simultaneous attack from the Taliban, U.S. drones, and the armed forces of the brutal, corrupt Pakistani regime. Recent government sweeps in Swat and South Waziristan have killed hundreds and created an estimated five million(!) refugees. Yet less than two years ago, protests by courageous Pakistani judges and lawyers followed by mass demonstrations drove out the U.S.—backed military government of Gen. Musharraf and restored formal democracy — such as it is in that vast impoverished country where the political parties are dominated by a small number of rich families. Even today, the struggle continues, with peasant women confronting police attacks and peasants in Hari who occupied the Karachi Press Club to protest land seizures. [3]

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Last June in Iran, after far-right President Ahmadinejad apparently stole his re-election, masses of courageous women and men took to the streets day after day in defense of democracy and defiance of the Ayatollahs and of brutal attacks by police and Islamic militias. Although the Western media were flooded with spectacular images and bla-bla about 'democracy,' the reaction of heads of state, from Obama to Chavez, was curiously cold and reserved. These spontaneous, self-organized demonstrators — women and men of all ages and social classes are still continuing their protests in less spectacular forms. They have creatively appropriated modern technologies like cellphones and Twitter to mobile street tactics, revealing the high degree of political maturity of the Iranian people, who, as we have seen, have a long revolutionary past. In any case, what the media didn't publicize was last Spring's wave of Iranian workers' strikes (naturally illegal) in transport, auto, construction, even oil which set the stage for the big democracy demonstrations. Although many workers participated as individuals in the 2009 year's democracy demonstrations, which were themselves reinforced by daily work stoppages in sympathy with the big crowds. The slogan of the workers, parodying Marx, was 'we have nothing to lose but our unpaid wages.' The Iranian working class, with its long memory of betrayal by middle-class movements, had no illusions about the 'moderate' candidates from whom Ahmadinejad stole the election or the 'Green' leaders, mostly former officials of the Islamic Republic whose hands are bloody with earlier massacres. [4] The world economic crisis has hurt Iran badly, and struggles are bound to become sharper. Iran is a modern, developed country with a large educated population, mostly young but wise in experience. Future developments there promise to be interesting. click on <http://hopoi.org/> to find out more about the Iranian labor movement and show your solidarity with hopoi: Hands Off the People of Iran.

The 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan was supposed to bring 'democracy', particularly women's rights, to what was depicted as a totally backward land. The tragic irony is that the Western occupation, by replacing the Taliban with



Hamid Karsai's corrupt Islamic regime of violent, reactionary warlords under a *Shariah* Constitution, made the situation of Afghani women even worse. Far from being totally backward, Afghanistan abolished *pardah* (the banning of women from public life) as early as 1959, when women began attending co-educational universities and joining the workforce. Women made more progress after the popular 1978 Peoples Democratic Party coup abolished feudal privilege and confiscated royal land and even after the Russian invasion of 1989. All these democratic advances were abolished after 1992 when U.S.-backed Islamist warlords and militias overthrew the Communist puppet government. So oppressive was warlord misrule — now once again restored by the Western coalition — that in 1996 much of the population felt relieved when the Taliban took Kabul. But not for long.

By 2001, Afghani women and democrats were ready to welcome the U.S. invaders as liberators. Popular participation in the 2002 *loya jurga* (the traditional gathering delegated to create a new government) was enthusiastic. According to participants, 'Women played a leading role at these meetings... The one issue that untied the delegates above all others was the urgency of reducing the power of warlords and establishing a truly representative government'. [5] Of course the U.S. occupiers ignored the *loya jurga* and set up a powerless reactionary puppet, while the country slid into violent chaos. Today, according to Zoya, spokeswoman for RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan which has been organizing and struggling among Afghani women since 1977, 'Afghanistan is now a free country: free for the rapists of women and children, free for the warlords, for drug lords, terrorists and occupation forces. It is not free for the people of Afghanistan.' To find out more about RAWA and support the Afghani women's struggle go to [www.rawa.org/](http://www.rawa.org/)

Finally, since Obama's 'surge' in Afghanistan, Iraq has slid largely under the media's radar, but huge U.S. bases remain and the bloody occupation/civil war continues. Meanwhile, women and trade unionists are fighting desperately for their rights — and sometimes their survival — caught in the cross-fire between Islamist militias on the one hand and on the other the U.S. Occupation and its Iraqi client government, which is still enforcing Saddam Hussein era anti-labor laws. Despite persecution, Iraqi workers and unemployed have organized, held national conferences, and successfully sought international support from trade-unionists in Japan, Europe and the U.S. To find out more, get involved and contribute money, contact U.S. Labor Against the War at <http://www.uslaboragainstawar.org/>

As for the fate of Iraqi women, one recalls that before the U.S.-led invasion, Iraq was a modern society with women occupying more than half the civil service jobs and working as doctors, lawyers and professors (even under Saddam's horrid Baathist dictatorship). Since the beginning of the U.S.-led occupation, Iraqi women have been courageously organizing OFWI, the Organization for Women's Freedom in Iraq in defiance of rapes and attacks on militant or unveiled women committed by both occupiers and local reactionaries. OWFI has been building battered-women's shelters, fighting honor killings, rapes and sex-trafficking that flourish under U.S.-imposed regime. These women — not the bearded killers — represent the true 'Iraqi resistance' which decent people ought to support. To find out more about Iraqi women's struggles and join them in solidarity, go to [www.equalityiniraq.com](http://www.equalityiniraq.com)

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By joining in solidarity with these non-violent civilian women and men, we Westerners can at least help them to make concrete gains, like building a union hall or a battered women's center. We thus become 'part of the solution' — rather than 'part of the problem.' Together with our civilian counterparts in the ME/A lands, we can begin to build bridges of international solidarity and weave networks uniting the freedom struggles of the oppressed 'colonial' world with the anti-capitalist resistance in the dominant imperialist world. By these simple, useful, concrete actions, we can begin to incarnate, today, the image of a future planetary social movement which alone can conceivably bring humane solutions to the crises created by capitalism.

Montpellier, France  
January, 2010

*Post-scriptum :*

*Richard Greeman: Longtime socialist and international activist is best known for his studies and translations of Victor Serge, the Franco-Russian novelist and revolutionary. His recent book *Beware of Vegetarian Sharks: Radical Rants and Internationalists Essays (Illustrated)* is available online at [www.lulu.com/content/923573](http://www.lulu.com/content/923573) (free downloads).*

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[1] Most famously by enforcing a hypocritical, one-side 'arms embargo' on the Left-leaning Republic, while allowing Hitler and Mussolini to 'smuggle' into Spain whole armored regiments and *Luftwaffe* squadrons to aid Franco's Church-backed military rebellion of fascist officers.

[2] Is such 'Another World' really 'Possible?' Please see my 'Ecotopia: A bet You Can't Refuse, '<http://www.stateofnature.org/ecotopiaABet.html>

[3] See "Editorial: Pakistan needs a revolution," *New & Letters*, December 2009, [www.newsandletters.org](http://www.newsandletters.org)

[4] See Yassamine Mather, 'Iranian Workers say: "We have nothing to lose but our unpaid wages,' *New Politics* # 48, Winter 2010.

[5] See Terry Moon, "Afghan lives and freedom sucked into U.S. quagmire," *News & Letters*, Oct.-Nov. 2009, [www.newsandletters.org](http://www.newsandletters.org) from which much of the information in this paragraph was gleaned.