



Washington's Wars and Occupations **Month in Review #61**

by Max Elbaum, War Times/Tiempo de Guerras

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MILITARISM RUN AMOK: AFGHANISTAN, GAZA, ARIZONA & BEYOND

Note: For updates on Israel's attack on the Gaza humanitarian aid flotilla and information about ongoing protests, see the alert War Times sent out May 31:

www.mailermailer.com/x?function=view&c=7284928a-e8699451%2a728935x-f9fc43fb

"First the execution, then the trial."

"Stop them if they look illegal – round `em up and deport `em."

"Lock `em up and throw away the key."

Excerpts from an unused script for the just concluded TV show "24"? Lines from a B-grade Western where cowboys in white hats triumph over Indians and Mexicans?

Or sentiments fanned daily by a powerful right-wing media machine and embraced by a substantial chunk of the U.S. public? Apt if crude descriptions of policies increasingly embedded in the structure and day-to-day practice of government in this country?

Unfortunately for people here and around the world, this is no Hollywood fantasy. Recent events from Arizona to Afghanistan to Gaza and beyond ought to be a big wake-up call about the dangers at hand. Especially ominous is the tight connection between the resurgent impulse to rely on repression, military force and violence to address social and political problems and the demonization/criminalization of entire groups of people.

There's plenty of resistance to some of the most blatant features of the anti-popular onslaught. And the terrain of battle is complicated because – at least according to the formal terms of the 2008 election – a majority of voters rejected the kind of fear-mongering and expansion of state repressive power that is again so prominent. These are sources of hope that indicate the potential for beating back the latest threats. But the overall picture also shows how deeply imperial militarism and a "use force" mentality – interwoven with racism and national chauvinism – has become implanted in the country's institutions and political culture.

EXECUTIONS WITHOUT TRIAL, TORTURE, INDEFINITE DETENTION

According to investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, U.S. forces in Afghanistan are carrying out "battlefield executions" of prisoners. Hersh, who broke the Abu Ghraib prison abuse story in 2004 (and the My Lai massacre story in 1968), says that commanders in Afghanistan "tell the troops, you have to make a determination within a day or two or so whether or not the prisoners are Taliban... And if you cannot conclude they're Taliban, you must turn them free. What it means is, and I've been told this anecdotally by five or six different people, battlefield executions are taking place. If they can't prove they're Taliban, bam."

It's not just Afghans being executed without even the semblance of a trial. *The New York Times* reported May 13 that the Obama administration authorized the CIA to kill a terrorism suspect who is a U.S. citizen living far from any current battlefield. Slated for execution is radical cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, now in hiding in Yemen. *The Times* reported the matter with total understatement: "The notion that the government can, in effect, execute one of its own citizens far from a combat zone, with no judicial process and based on secret intelligence, makes some legal authorities deeply uneasy... To eavesdrop on the suspect intelligence agencies would have to get a court warrant. But designating him for death, as CIA officials did early this year with the National Security Council's approval, required no judicial review."

Then there's torture and indefinite detention. According to the White House, the U.S. no longer tortures prisoners as it did during the Bush years. But there is strong evidence that the same techniques are still employed at the U.S. airbase in Bagram Afghanistan. The BBC reports that the Red Cross confirms the existence at Bagram of a facility for detainees – a so-called "black jail" – separate from the main prison, despite Pentagon denials. At least nine former prisoners told the BBC that they had been subject to torture techniques in that facility.

Meanwhile a federal appeals court ruled May 21 that three men who had been detained by the U.S. military for years without trial in Afghanistan had no recourse to U.S. courts. The Obama administration claimed the same powers as its predecessor to hold detainees indefinitely without any kind of trial and praised the decision. The detainees, two Yemenis and a Tunisian, say they were captured outside Afghanistan and are innocent of any wrongful activities. If it stands, the ruling will allow the military and government to imprison any non-U.S. citizen for as long as they want, the only proviso being they are held in a prison outside the U.S.

MAJOR EXPANSION OF CLANDESTINE MILITARY OPERATIONS

These are not isolated items. *The New York Times* reported May 24 that the new orders from the top U.S. commander in the Middle East mandate a big expansion of clandestine military activity. A secret directive signed last September by General David Petraeus authorizes sending Special Operations troops to both "friendly" and "hostile" nations in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Horn of Africa. The order includes Iran, and officials said the order permits reconnaissance that could pave the way for possible military strike against that country.

This new directive gives the military more latitude than it had even under the Bush administration. Bush had approved some clandestine military activities far from designated war zones, but government officials speaking anonymously stated that the new order "is intended to make such efforts more systematic and long term."

Exposed by *The Times* just a few days before the Obama administration issued its first formal National Security Strategy, this expansion of military power appears to be counter to the spirit if not the letter of the President's policy. In contrast to official doctrine under Bush, the new Strategy document stresses multilateralism over unilateralism and declares that the U.S. cannot

sustain extended military operations abroad indefinitely. It even says that key to national security is addressing problems of the U.S. economy, education, energy and climate change.

These are good concepts. To the degree they actually become the driver of Washington's concrete actions, it would mark a step in the right direction. But these declarations remain paired with insistence that the U.S. maintain "military superiority" and that Washington will, if it deems necessary, act alone with whatever military force the administration feels is needed. Unfortunately it is these parts of the document that are driving the latest round of U.S. actions. These constitute an extremely dangerous expansion of militarism and state repressive power, even if they are not conducted under the Bush-era rhetoric of "might makes right" and a "permanent war on terror."

PROTECTING ISRAEL, EVEN AFTER PIRACY AND MURDER

Other important aspects of administration policy this month also show a disconnect between rhetoric and action. For months the administration has been publicly critical of Israeli settlement building. Top U.S. military leaders have declared that indefinite blocking of an Israel-Palestine peace agreement undermines U.S. strategic interests. This public posture has made Obama the object of vitriolic attacks from the far right. But what is the administration doing in practice? Earlier this month it requested an additional \$205 million in military aid to Israel on top of the record-breaking \$3 billion already present in the 2011 budget. And as most of the world reacts with outrage to last night's Israeli attack on an the Gaza aid flotilla – an act of international piracy and murder – Washington is positioning itself once again to give Israel diplomatic cover.

In an especially bitter irony, this is taking place at a time when a new level of criticism of Israeli policies has broken out right within an important sector of U.S. Zionism. Former *New Republic* editor Peter Beinart sparked a firestorm with a *New York Review of Books* piece that pilloried Israeli government policies and defense of them by the major U.S. Zionist organizations. In defending his article, Beinart burnished his "no- one-can-accuse-me-of-not-loving-Israel" credentials by saying that he "does not demand that Israel give its Arab citizens equal rights" but stood his ground as far as condemning the Israeli right wing by writing:

The prime minister of Israel has repeatedly compared the establishment of a Palestinian state to the Holocaust. His foreign minister, and protégé, has flirted with advocating the physical expulsion of Israeli Arabs. The spiritual leader of his government's fourth-largest party has called for politicians who advocate ceding territory to the Palestinians to be struck dead. West Bank settlements are growing at triple the rate of the Israeli population, and according to a recent Tel Aviv University poll, 80% of religious Jewish Israeli high schoolers would refuse orders to dismantle them. One-third of Jewish Israelis favor pardoning Yigal Amir, the man who murdered Yitzhak Rabin... there is only one decent response to these truths: fury. If you're not angry, you're either not paying attention or you don't care.

Full text of Beinart's article: www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/jun/10/failure-american-jewish-establishment/?page=1

With such indictments coming even from prominent pro-Israel U.S. Jews; with ambitious general like Petraeus implying that Israeli stonewalling is a threat to U.S. interests; with almost the entire political class screaming about the budget deficit; and with Israel now boarding ships and killing unarmed humanitarian activists in international waters, one would think the time was favorable for talking about cuts rather than expansion of military and diplomatic assistance to Tel Aviv. But the House vote on Obama's aid-Israel request was a staggering 410-4. And Washington stands alone in its failure to resolutely condemn Israel's latest brutality. These constitute the very opposite of a policy shift on this key volatile conflict. They are endorsements of militarism and occupation and signs of just how hostage to that "big muddy" combination

Washington's Middle East policy remains. No wonder the banner headline across Israel's *Maariv* newspaper's front page May 27 – "Netanyahu: 'I Won'" – indicated the glee of those who plan not only to permanently occupy Palestinian land but drag the U.S. into war against Iran.

TROOPS TO ARIZONA

Then there is the decision to send National Guard troops to the U.S.-Mexico border. Obama has joined the chorus of criticism against that state's draconian anti-immigrant law, SB1070, a welcome addition to the campaign to expose and counter the anti-Latino bias that lies at its core. The President also continues to call for comprehensive immigration reform that would include a humane and workable path to legalization. But when it comes to positive steps on the ground, all we have so far is a Justice Department "studying and investigating" whether it will act to block SB1070. There are no orders to end – or even reduce – the family-busting, inhumane raids that ICE has been conducting all over the country. Instead, the President accepts a right-wing demand and deploys the National Guard.

The step only reinforces militarization of society and buttresses the "force is a solution" mindset. The only thing it could possibly accomplish is making more peoples' lives harder and whetting the appetite of the "Deport-'em-all" Lobby for even more repressive force. The roots of large-scale south- to-north migration lie in economic and social conditions, unequal relations between the U.S. and Latin America, displacement of people from their homes as multinational corporations distort local economies, the drive of U.S.-based employers for a pool of vulnerable and cheap labor, and so on. Walls, troops and raids will not stop any of this. They will only inflict misery and perpetuate bigotry as corporate interests laugh all the way to the bank.

The specifics of Arizona are obviously different from the Middle East. But the conflict between U.S. corporate interests, local elites and vulnerable populations has many parallels. Life in the U.S.-Mexico border region especially is becoming more and more similar to life under occupation, with the Border Patrol and now the National Guard functioning as a the occupying force. As in Afghanistan or Palestine, military and military-type force does not address – in fact, exacerbates – the underlying causes of conflict; and the longer one travels the road of seeking military solutions, the harder it is to climb out of an ever-deepening hole.

URGENT, MULTI-LEVELLED FIGHTBACK

The resistance to all this is and will be complex. The mix of factors tilting for and against us is complicated. The big outcry against Arizona's law from prominent figures in the worlds of sports and entertainment as well as politics is heartening. And it was a boost to see Mexico's President Felipe Calderon issue a forthright anti-racial profiling message while speaking to the U.S. Congress, something few U.S. politicians seem to have the guts to do. Despite all that polls show a narrow majority of the U.S. people saying SB1070 "gets it about right." A great deal will depend on how much momentum and broad reach the grassroots movement springing to life against SB1070 can acquire in the next several months. Building on the National Day of Action May 29, preparations are underway for a host of activities in Arizona and nationwide; Alto Arizona (www.altoarizona.com) is one good place to get full information.

Regarding Afghanistan and the general use of direct U.S. military force in the Middle East, the landscape is somewhat different. Public opinion has soured on these adventures over the last several years. Majority sentiment is skeptical that the U.S. will accomplish anything positive in Afghanistan (or Iraq.) And each week news reports and admissions from Washington's own commanders indicate that these are indeed lost causes. But antiwar activism at the base level is muted, and decisions to authorize more covert activities or hold prisoners indefinitely without trial that would have led to significant protests had they been made by Bush do not spark the

same level of resistance with Obama in office. To change this will require an antiwar movement that finds new ways to combine educational activities, mass public protests and integration of antiwar and cut-the-military-budget efforts into the growing fights over jobs, services, immigrant rights, and environmental protection.

Fighting to end blank-check U.S. support for Israel occupation, meanwhile, involves a whole set of special challenges. But the glaring disconnect between even the most minimal respect for human life or (per the U.S. Declaration of Independence) "a decent respect for the opinions of mankind" vs. Israel's recent actions opens up new possibilities for broad educational and protest activities.

All these will be most effective if a consistent anti-militarist theme is struck as often as possible. "Shoot 'em and lock 'em up" demagoguery can grip popular sentiment for some time. But it has no real solutions to the actual problems that afflict an increasingly inter-connected and fragile world (which is why its diehard adherents retreat steadily into a world where fantasy and crazy replaces reality.)

This creates opportunities for advocates of peace and justice to offer a solve-real-problems message on a variety of levels. In a time of extended economic hardship, catastrophic oil spills and wars that threaten to engulf entire regions, our arsenal ranges from the full critique of empire and imperial-era racism through the call for fair-play and common sense to an appeal for everyone to think about the very survival of this generation and the next. Dr. Martin Luther King saw things clearly four decades ago when he argued that in today's world "We will live together as brothers and sisters or perish together as fools."

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