

Egypt, Tunisia, and the fight against US imperialism

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Two weeks after US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned Arab leaders that their region's "foundations are sinking into the sand", the growing revolutionary upsurge of the masses has revealed that the pillars of Washington's own policy in the Middle East are rotten and crumbling.

The mass uprising that toppled the 23-year rule of Tunisian dictator Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali has now been followed by tens of thousands of young demonstrators in Egypt taking to the streets, defying security forces, and in increasing numbers giving their lives, to demand the downfall of Hosni Mubarak and his nearly three-decade-old regime. Thousands more demonstrated Thursday in the Yemeni capital of Sanaa, calling for the ouster of Ali Abdullah Saleh, who has ruled the country for more than 30 years.

In every case, masses of youth and workers have risen up against regimes that are synonymous with social inequality, corruption, political repression and torture and which have been firmly aligned with and largely financed by US imperialism. They have been driven to act by the same conditions of unemployment, rising prices and government abuse that led the young Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi to set himself ablaze in protest, inspiring the demonstrations that swept his homeland.

These conditions have rendered life increasingly intolerable for millions of people throughout the region, while denying the younger generation any future. They are the legacy of an entire epoch of colonial domination followed by the inability and unwillingness of the bourgeois nationalist movements of the region to forge any independence from imperialism. Now these conditions of mass poverty and oppression have been deepened immensely by a historic crisis of world capitalism that has its center in the United States itself.

It is nearly a decade since the administration of George W. Bush, utilizing the September 11, 2001 attacks as a pretext, launched wars first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq, with the aim of exploiting US military supremacy to establish the unchallenged hegemony of American imperialism in the

region. Having cost the lives of over a million people and drained the US economy of over a trillion dollars, these continuing wars and occupations have achieved none of their original goals, while deepening the hatred toward Washington throughout the Middle East and internationally.

During the heady days of imperialist triumphalism that accompanied the launching of these wars, the Bush administration proclaimed its support for a "freedom agenda." It advanced the thesis that a "liberated" Iraq would serve as an inspiration for the masses of the region to embrace "freedom" and "democracy" while aligning themselves with the interests of the United States and Israel.

Washington's purported support for democracy and free elections in the region was short-lived. A parliamentary election in Palestinian occupied territories delivered a clear victory to the Islamist Hamas movement, which rejected the framework of the US-sponsored "peace process" and the US responded by supporting an attempted coup and then a partition of the West Bank and Gaza, with the Palestinian people subjected to unceasing collective punishment for their choice at the ballot box.

Similarly, the recent coming to office of a government backed by the Hezbollah movement in Lebanon, in accordance with the rules of the country's parliamentary system, has been treated by Washington as an illegitimate coup prompting threats of aid cutoffs and even military aggression.

In an interview on National Public Radio, Thursday, Graeme Bannerman, the former Middle East analyst on the US State Department Policy Planning Staff, voiced the real position of the US government—under both Bush and Obama—hidden by all of the rhetoric about supporting reform and human rights.

"Popular opinion in the Middle East runs so against American policies," he said, "that any change in any government in the Middle East that becomes more popular will have an anti-American and certainly less friendly direction towards the US which will be a serious political problem for us."

Nowhere is this more true than in Egypt. For 34 years, ever since Anwar Sadat made his trip to Jerusalem and subsequently signed the Camp David accords with Israel, the US has backed the military dictatorship headed first by Sadat and then his successor, Mubarak.

Egypt has served as the linchpin of US policy in the Middle East. In return, the US has lavished \$1.3 billion in military aid upon the Egyptian regime every year. The bullets, tear gas and truncheons employed against the youth and workers demonstrating in Cairo and elsewhere bear the clear stamp of “Made in the USA.”

From the outset of the spreading revolt in the Middle East, official Washington has been taken aback by events. In Tunisia, just three days before Ben Ali boarded an aircraft and fled the wrath of his own people for exile in Saudi Arabia, US Secretary of State Clinton expressed her concern over the “unrest and instability” in the country, while extolling the “very positive aspects of our relationship” with the country’s longtime dictator. She insisted that Washington was “not taking sides,” as US trained and equipped troops were shooting down demonstrators in the streets.

Only after the downfall of its ally Ben Ali, did the Obama administration discover, in the president’s words, “the courage and dignity of the Tunisian people.” In his State of the Union speech he proclaimed that the US “stands with the people of Tunisia.” He extended no such verbal backing to the people of Egypt, where that very day riot squads and secret police thugs had carried out mass arrests and beaten demonstrators and journalists alike.

On Thursday, Vice President Joe Biden made clear the administration’s continued commitment to the hated dictatorship in Egypt. “Mubarak has been an ally of ours on a number of things. And he’s been very responsible ... relative to (US) geopolitical interests in the region ... to normalizing relationship with Israel,” Biden declared. “I would not refer to him as a dictator,” he added, insisting that Mubarak should not step down.

The unmistakable message is that if the Mubarak regime must resort to a bloodbath to prevent being overthrown by the masses in the streets, it will be firmly supported by Washington. All of the talk about urging the regime to carry out self-reform is utterly hollow. The time when the sclerotic Egyptian dictatorship of the 82-year-old Mubarak was even capable of such measures is long past.

Meanwhile, as the *Wall Street Journal* put it Thursday, “the US is trying to re-channel the spreading anger in the region.” It has dispatched Jeffrey Feltman, the top US State Department official for the region, to Tunis to oversee the maneuvers aimed at salvaging the Ben Ali dictatorship without Ben Ali. In Egypt, the arrival in Cairo of Mohamed

ElBaradei, the Nobel Peace Prize winner and former head of the UN nuclear regulatory agency, may well signal the launching of a US initiative aimed at achieving a negotiated settlement.

Washington fears, above all, the entry into mass political struggle of the tens of millions of Egyptian workers. In a country where 40 percent of the population subsists at the poverty level of \$2 a day or less, US-fostered “freedom” has been delivered in the form of “free market” capitalism, which has promoted wholesale privatizations, opening of markets and other measures that have enriched a thin layer at the top, while driving the bulk of the population into deepening misery.

The global capitalist crisis that is fueling the upheavals in the Middle East has its center within the United States itself. The debacle confronting Washington in the region is a telling measure of the deepening decline of US imperialism.

The workers of Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, Algeria and elsewhere in the region who are entering mass struggles will find their greatest ally in the working class of the United States, which is confronting the deepest attacks on jobs, living standards and basic rights in its history.

The demands of the workers and youth who have taken to the streets of Tunis, Cairo and other Arab cities for jobs, livable wages and democratic rights can only be achieved in a revolutionary struggle to put an end to capitalism, which is incapable of meeting even the most basic needs of the working population in any country.

The burning task posed by these events is the building of a new revolutionary leadership, fighting for the unification of the working class across national boundaries in the struggle for the United Socialist States of the Middle East and the Maghreb as part of the world socialist revolution. This means building sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International throughout the region.

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