

Israel staggered by Egypt protests, social tensions at home

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The right-wing Israeli government of Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been staggered by the massive demonstrations and strike wave engulfing Egypt, its critical Arab ally in the region, and the simultaneous emergence of social opposition in Israel itself.

In recent weeks, there have been several demonstrations in Israel's predominantly Arab towns in support of the Egypt protests, including a small one in Tel Aviv of Palestinian and Jewish Israelis. In addition, Israel's newspapers have noted in passing expressions of public sympathy for the mass protests in Egypt calling for an end to the Mubarak regime.

Not so the Israeli government. In speech after speech, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has warned that should the Mubarak dictatorship fall, chaos will prevail. Though the Muslim Brotherhood do not have majority support and have made very clear their intention not to lead protests against Mubarak, Netanyahu constantly raises the spectre of the Islamic revolution in Iran: the Islamists, meaning the Muslim Brotherhood, will take control in Egypt, abrogate the 1978-9 peace deal at Camp David, and march on Israel. By implication, Netanyahu is suggesting that the fall of the Mubarak dictatorship is an event Israel might oppose by force.

The Israeli ruling class's fear over the events in Egypt is two-fold. In the first place, Egypt—with its large economy, population of nearly 80 million, and control of the Suez Canal—is Israel's key ally in the region. It has played the crucial role in strangling resistance to the dispossession of the Palestinians.

Equally as important, the conditions that led to the revolution in Egypt also prevail in Israel: youth unemployment and underemployment; spiraling prices; growing social polarization; and a corrupt and anti-democratic ruling elite personified by Netanyahu himself. Israel is a social powder keg, characterized by enormous social inequality and poverty, governed by a corrupt and

reactionary kleptocracy.

These social contradictions recently came to the fore when Israel's federation of labor unions, Histadrut, declared a labor dispute for public sector workers and some private sector workers. This gives it the legal right to declare a general strike in two weeks' time. It is asking that Tel Aviv move quickly to raise the minimum wage, reverse prices on bread, cut water prices, end the tax on fuel, and move toward reducing the costs of housing prices. It is a desperate attempt to warn ruling circles that Israel's working class is on the verge of revolt.

Histadrut's suppression of strikes and worker protest have played the most important role in creating in Israel among the world's highest levels of social inequality. The unions are signaling, however, that they are profoundly concerned that rising social discontent in Israel could explode.

Netanyahu rapidly announced that he was preparing measures to deal with these concerns. These included a cut in public transport costs of 10 percent, a \$122 increase in the monthly minimum wage, and cancelled the recently-imposed gasoline tax that had raised gas prices to \$8.50 per gallon.

A fear of the development of a united struggle against war and capitalist oppression by workers in both Egypt and Israel is driving Netanyahu's policies.

While it prepares for war with Egypt, Israel is working directly with the Egyptian authorities to suppress the Egyptian masses. That it is working with Suleiman is no accident. He was the man Israel worked with to suppress the Palestinians, and is Tel Aviv's choice to succeed Mubarak as president, as the US cables released by WikiLeaks show. The newspaper *Ma'ariv*, citing an official in Netanyahu's office, has reported that the prime minister called Suleiman to propose Israeli intelligence personnel could undertake various specialist operations to

bring an end to the demonstrations.

Last week, for the first time since the Camp David Accords outlawed troops in Sinai, Netanyahu agreed to let Egypt send 800 soldiers there. This followed the spread of unrest to El Arish and the Sinai Peninsula, where the Bedouin, who have for some time been waging a rebellion against the Mubarak regime, killed at least 12 police officers in armed clashes last weekend. Egyptian troops have since fought repeatedly with Bedouin forces, including a two-hour clash on Gaza's border February 7.

Israel's politicians and military chiefs are preparing for war in the event the Mubarak regime falls and is replaced by a government not to Tel Aviv's liking. Netanyahu told parliament that Israel must be prepared for any outcome in Egypt, "by reinforcing the might of the State of Israel." A defence official told the news site *Ynet* that a fundamental change of government in Egypt might lead to a "revolution in Israel's security doctrine," because the Camp David Accords was an important strategic asset, "which enables the IDF [Israel Defence Forces] to focus on other theatres."

Following Egypt's defeats at the hands of Israel in the wars of 1967 and 1973, and the mass uprisings over the cost of food in 1977, President Anwar Sadat threw in his lot with Washington and signed a peace deal with Israel at Camp David in 1978 and 1979. Sadat's signature signified the end of Egypt's efforts to manoeuvre between Moscow and Washington, and of any semblance of independence from imperialism. It provoked the ire of Islamic forces who assassinated Sadat in 1981, paving the way for Mubarak, his vice president, to come to power and rule under Emergency Powers that have been continually renewed and expanded.

Sadat's signature was the necessary down payment for US support for his ailing regime. It led to the end of the state of war, the recognition of the state of Israel and normalization of trade relations. One half of Israel's gas supplies now come from Egypt, and Israel has the right of free passage through the Suez Canal, the Red Sea and the Straits of Tiran. The pay-off has been \$60 billion of American aid, second only to that given to Israel.

For Israel, the peace treaty with Egypt enabled the illegal incorporation of the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights into a "Greater Israel". Starting with the Madrid Conference in 1991, the peace treaty also allowed Israel to slash its massive defence budget from 30 percent of GDP in the 1970s to 9 percent today, cut its armed forces in Sinai, reduce the maximum age of reservist duty,

and focus on counter-insurgency, rather than the threat of an invasion by land and aerial forces.

No longer faced with a threat of war, Israel, which boasts of being the Middle East's "only democracy", has insisted that it was forced to work with brutal autocracies such as Mubarak's because of the overarching threat to Israel from Muslim fundamentalism. Now that millions of people have come out onto the street to overturn their government, Israel's ruling elite has been forced to reveal the falsity of its claims. In reality, Israel backs the Arab dictatorships because they help the Israeli state suppress the Arab and Israeli working masses.

As Amira Hass wrote in *Ha'aretz* about the impact of the events in Egypt on the Palestinians, "There is a miraculous moment in popular uprisings, when fear of the machinery of repression no longer deters people in their masses and that machinery begins to unravel into its component parts—who are also people. They stop obeying and begin thinking. Where is that moment for us?"

Hass continued, "Let us not delude ourselves. There will be no confusion here. Precise instructions, clear and immediate, will be given to the Israeli soldiers. The IDF of Operation Cast Lead will not give up its heritage. Even if it is a march of 200,000 unarmed civilians—the order will be to shoot."

These are indeed the types of method that the Israeli state and its backers in Washington have become accustomed to using. However, the Israeli ruling class would fear the effect of responding to social opposition by the Israeli working class with similar brutal methods. This is why Netanyahu is trying to drive a wedge between Jewish and Arab workers, and prevent a unified struggle for their social and democratic demands against the war-mongering of the capitalist class.



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