

Obama's Middle East speech: “democratic” rhetoric cloaks predatory policy

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In his “Arab spring” speech Thursday, Obama sought to cloak US imperialism’s predatory aims in the Middle East and North Africa in a mass of hypocritical and empty “democratic” rhetoric.

While promoted by the White House as the initiation of a change of course in US policy, Obama’s rambling and distorted review of recent developments in the region offered nothing of the kind.

Rather, it signaled US imperialism’s determination to continue its drive to exert hegemonic control over the oil-rich countries of the Middle East and North Africa in the face of a powerful revolutionary challenge from below and ever stiffer competition from economic rivals in China and Europe.

According to initial press reports, the speech was largely received with dismissal and contempt in the Arab countries. Despite Obama’s use of the word “democracy” or “democratic” 23 times in his address, there was no sense in the speech that anything has changed in the policy of a government that has steadfastly backed ruthless dictatorships and monarchies in the region and given unqualified support for six decades to Israel’s suppression of the Palestinian people.

Obama began by summarily dismissing the significance of the two US wars that began under the Bush White House and have continued under his presidency, claiming the lives of over a million people.

“Now, already, we’ve done much to shift our foreign policy following a decade defined by two costly conflicts,” he said. “After years of war in Iraq, we’ve removed 100,000 American troops and ended our combat mission there. In Afghanistan, we’ve broken the Taliban’s momentum, and this July we will begin to bring our troops home and continue a transition to Afghan lead.”

As if militarism and war did not continue to “define” US foreign policy. In Iraq, nearly 50,000 US troops remain, and the Pentagon is maneuvering with the Iraqi government to keep a significant number of them there permanently. As for the claim that the US has “broken the Taliban’s momentum,” with nearly 100,000 troops in Afghanistan, violence remains at record levels and there is every indication that the population is turning ever more hostile to the US occupation and the puppet government that it has maintained.

Obama went on to boast of the US killing of Osama bin Laden as a “huge blow” to al-Qaeda, while in the same breath acknowledging that the former CIA ally had lost his “relevance” in the face of the upheavals in the Middle East over the past several months. The attempt to segue from a dirty assassination to the revolutionary uprising of the masses fell flat.

Perhaps the most hypocritical aspect of the speech—and one that will evoke contempt throughout the Arab world—was Obama’s attempt to

identify US policy and “values” with the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt.

He began by retelling the story of Mohammed Bouazizi, the young Tunisian street vendor who set himself on fire in protest over abuse at the hands of the Tunisian authorities, an act that inspired protests that spread and grew, finally leading to the ouster of the dictatorial regime of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Obama’s invocation of Bouazizi’s name is beneath contempt. While the young man lay dying and Tunisians were being shot and beaten in the streets, his administration approved a \$12 million military aid package in an attempt to keep the regime in place.

The same pattern was repeated in Egypt, where the Obama administration sought to the very last to salvage the dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak, whose regime had been kept in place with US military aid and political support for three decades. Only after the Egyptian military made the decision to pull the plug on Mubarak’s rule did Obama publicly state his support for the dictator’s ouster.

Obama continued by proclaiming, “In too many countries, power has been concentrated in the hands of the few. In too many countries, a citizen like that young vendor had nowhere to turn—no honest judiciary to hear his case; no independent media to give him voice; no credible political party to represent his views; no free and fair election where he could choose his leader.”

The US president cast these conditions as characteristic of the Middle East. But are they really so inapplicable to the United States itself, where federal and state governments are imposing drastic social cutbacks that will deny “dignity” to millions, and where power and wealth are more concentrated in the hands of a few than virtually anywhere on the planet?

Do Bouazizi’s American counterparts, the millions of unemployed and underpaid young workers in the US, have anywhere to turn in terms of political parties that will represent their interests or a media that will speak to their concerns and demands?

Yet Obama tried to cast the US as the example to be emulated and the benevolent power whose role it is to guide the Arab peoples to democracy.

He said that the US would continue to pursue its “core interests” in the region, which he defined as “countering terrorism and stopping the spread of nuclear weapons; securing the free flow of commerce, and safe-guarding the security of the region, standing up for Israel’s security and pursuing Arab-Israeli peace.”

Oddly missing from this list, and indeed from the entire speech was one three-letter word, “oil.” Its omission underscores the lying character of the entire address.

The US, Obama said, would continue to pursue these “core

interests” with “the firm belief that America’s interests are not hostile to people’s hopes; they are essential to them.” He didn’t bother to explain—much less apologize for—how the defense of these regional interests was anchored for three decades in the repressive apparatus of the Mubarak dictatorship.

Now, he said, the US would support “universal rights” of freedom of speech, assembly and religion, the rule of law and “the right to choose your own leaders—whether you live in Baghdad or Damascus, Sanaa or Tehran.”

Noticeably absent from this list were Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Kuwait, all reactionary monarchical dictatorships that serve as linchpins of the domination of US energy conglomerates and the US military’s operations in the region.

Obama included in the speech a somewhat hasty and unintentionally revealing defense of the US-NATO war against Libya. He began by claiming that the Iraq experience had taught Washington “how costly and difficult it is to impose regime change by force—no matter how well-intentioned it may be.” He continued, “But in Libya, we saw the prospect of imminent massacre.... Had we not acted along with our NATO allies and regional coalition partners, thousands would have been killed.”

By attributing good intentions to the Bush administration’s 2003 invasion of Iraq, the US president endorses a war of aggression launched on the basis of lies. He then acknowledges that the war in Libya, ostensibly carried out to protect civilian lives, is in fact a war for “regime change.” The claims that if Washington and NATO had not acted “thousands would have been killed,” has never been substantiated. And, in fact, thousands have died—and millions have been turned into refugees—as a result of a civil war that is being prosecuted by means of NATO military power.

In both Iraq and Libya, the wars involve not “universal rights,” but rather “core interests,” above all US imperialism’s drive to exert hegemony over the world’s strategic energy reserves.

In short, the “universal values” espoused by Obama are eminently flexible, their method of application determined entirely by US imperialism’s “core interests.”

The speech also promoted US initiatives to “advance economic development for countries that transition to democracy.” Obama asserted that this was based on the understanding that the revolutionary upheavals in the region were driven by concerns over “putting food on the table” and being “unable to find a job.”

What Washington’s proposed economic policies amount to is an attempt to use the changes brought about by the mass protests to open the region up even more fully to the exploitation of American capitalism and US-based transnationals.

He said that US policy would “focus on trade, not just aid; and investment, not just assistance.” Its aim, he said, would be opening up the region’s markets, while “ensuring financial stability.”

It was precisely the pursuit of capitalist free market policies under the dictatorships of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt that produced staggering levels of social inequality and opened up these countries’ economies to the impact of the financial meltdown of 2008, producing the growth in unemployment. These conditions of inequality and unemployment played the decisive role in sparking the resistance of the working class in the first place.

The aim of the Obama administration is to use limited credits—\$1 billion in debt relief and \$1 billion in new borrowing from the US Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC)—to tie the Egyptian

economy more closely to the US. These sums are eclipsed by the billions of dollars in military aid that Washington continues to bestow on Mubarak’s successor regime, which is essentially a military junta that continues to repress the Egyptian people and lock up and torture dissidents.

The section of Obama’s speech that has drawn the most attention from the US media is his remarks on the Israeli-Palestinian question. Much has been made of his call for a resumption of negotiations based on the goal of creating two states—Israel and Palestine—“based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps, so that secure and recognized borders are established for both states.”

The Republican right has seized on this statement, claiming it represents a betrayal of Israel. The more astute reactions in Israel to the speech, however, were quite different.

“Obama has granted Netanyahu a major diplomatic victory,” the Israeli daily *Haaretz* commented. It noted that the US president had invoked the creation of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders “without defining the size of these lands” and providing for “swaps” that would allow Israel to retain control of the vast settlements in the West Bank, rendering any new state unviable.

The report also noted that Obama made no condemnation of the illegal settlements nor did he demand a freeze on settlement activity, which is sharply accelerating with plans unveiled Thursday for building 1,550 new homes in the occupied territories around Jerusalem.

Dripping in hypocrisy, Obama’s speech referred to Israelis living in fear of their children being killed and Palestinians’ “suffering and humiliation” under occupation. One would never guess that Israeli occupation has claimed 100 Palestinian lives for every Israeli killed in the conflict or that just days before, Israeli troops had shot to death 16 unarmed Palestinian protesters who sought to assert their right to return to their homeland by scaling borders into Israeli occupied territory.

That these demonstrations, which were joined by many thousands of workers and youth who marched on the borders from squalid refugee camps, are part and parcel of the revolutionary wave sweeping the region was utterly excluded from Obama’s “vision.”

In the end, the speech presented nothing new in terms of US policy and expressed the Obama administration’s commitment to using the traditional tools of militarism, economic domination and CIA destabilization to assert US control over the region’s strategic energy resources and to quell the struggles of its working class.

At the same time, however, this absence of substantive initiatives and utter inability to make any credible appeal to the Arab masses express the decline of US imperialist influence in the region and the increasing desperation of the American ruling elite as it attempts to fend off the threat of revolutionary upheaval.



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