

War in the Middle East, imperialism and the lessons of the Egyptian Revolution

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This speech was delivered by Johannes Stern, leading member of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit in Germany, to the May 3 International May Day Online Rally, organized by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

The central theme of this international May Day rally is the rising tide of war and the threat of a third world war. There is hardly any part of the world where this is more apparent than in the Middle East. It brings to mind the powder keg in the Balkans prior to the First World War, but the potential for violence and destruction is far greater today.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the region finds itself in a perpetual state of war. Entire countries lie in ruins; millions of people have perished or been turned into refugees. This is the result of the aspirations of US imperialism, heralded by Bush Senior, to create a “New World Order” or “Pax Americana.” That was not just megalomania. In place of “order” and “peace,” chaos, war and destruction prevail.

The terror attacks of September 11, 2001 were a turning point. The background to these events was never explained. However, Washington used them to implement war plans devised long ago under the mantle of the “war on terror”. In 2001, Afghanistan was attacked and occupied. In 2003, the invasion of Iraq followed. Terms such as Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, “enhanced interrogation,” “waterboarding” and “killer drones” are today synonymous with the illegal torture and killing techniques of imperialism.

The “war on terror” was also a milestone for the ruling elites in Europe. Most European states initially adopted a cautious attitude toward the American invasion of Iraq. But they supported the war in Afghanistan without reservation. They played a central role in the NATO war in Libya and the dirty

intervention in Syria. Today all the imperialist powers are playing ever higher stakes on the roulette wheel of this region, so rich in natural resources.

They intervene either directly or by arming and financing local proxies. At the same time, yesterday’s “friends” can become today’s enemies and vice versa. The Mafia had a “code of honour.” The imperialists know only the “law of the jungle.” They use every disastrous intervention as justification for the next war. They resort to ever more cynical and brutal means to enforce their predatory interests.

In Libya and Syria, the CIA and other Western intelligence services have fomented sectarian wars in order to overthrow the regimes of Muammar Gaddafi and Bashar al-Assad. In doing so, they have closely collaborated with Al Qaeda and other radical Islamist militias, from which the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) later emerged. The crimes of ISIS are now used by imperialism as a pretext for a more direct military intervention. As if the workers had forgotten how the Western media glorified the atrocities of Islamist cutthroats in Syria, until only recently, as a struggle for liberation against the Assad regime!

Each of these wars was justified with falsifications and grotesque lies. The longer the wars last, the more dishonest becomes the propaganda. It began with weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, women’s liberation in Afghanistan and continued “humanitarian” interventions in Libya and Syria. In the latest war in Yemen, the Western powers proceed with hardly any excuse at all. With the help of their reactionary allies in the region—above all the Saudi monarchy and the al-Sisi regime in Egypt—they are once more reducing a destitute country to rubble and ash.

The devastation of Yemen recalls the savage destruction wrought by the US-backed Israeli war in

Gaza last summer. Almost the entire infrastructure of the world's largest open-air prison lies in ruins, and over 2,200 Palestinians, including more than 500 children, were killed.

It is not necessary to expose the “humanitarian” phrases of the imperialists. The objective facts and the catastrophic effects of war have already done that. But the question remains: Why has almost uninterrupted war dominated the Middle East for nearly 25 years? The answer is clear. The US and the leading European colonial powers want to control and exploit the resource-rich and strategically important region whatever the cost. Their main concern is oil!

And not least among their concerns is the subjugation of the working class. That was made very clear with the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. The intervention of the imperialist powers only intensified after the working class reared its head and brought down two brutal servants of imperialism, Ben Ali and Mubarak, at the beginning of 2011.

The imperialist powers were as surprised by the intervention of the working class as they were afraid of it. In the war in Libya, which lies geographically between Tunisia and Egypt, they recognized an opportunity to establish a pro-Western puppet regime and divide the working class along ethnic and sectarian lines. They pursued the same goal in Syria.

They received support from a wide range of petty bourgeois parties and academics, who attempted to provide a cover for the recolonization of North Africa and the Middle East with pseudo-left arguments. In Libya, they argued in favour of the carpet-bombing carried out by NATO as a “humanitarian” mission. In Syria they presented the wrath of Islamist militias as a “revolutionary struggle” for democracy.

In his book *Imperialism*, Lenin wrote almost 100 years ago, “General enthusiasm over the prospects of imperialism, furious defence of it and painting it in the brightest colours—such are the signs of the times.” One could not sum up the response of the entire liberal and pseudo-left milieu to the Egyptian Revolution any better today.

The international working class reacted with great excitement to the mass struggles in Egypt, including in Israel, where popular anger over poverty, inequality and cuts to education, housing and health care also led to mass protests of hundreds of thousands in 2011.

The affluent middle class and its political organizations, however, were profoundly shocked by the revolutionary developments in Egypt. Although they initially supported the protests against Mubarak, they recoiled in terror when they realized the struggles of the working class posed a threat to the capitalist state and the predominance of imperialism.

At every stage of the revolution they tried to subordinate the working class to one or another faction of the Egyptian bourgeoisie. This culminated in their counterrevolutionary campaign for the military coup in June 2013, which they cynically celebrated as a “second revolution.”

What a sham!

The al-Sisi regime is not the embodiment of the revolution, but rather represents bloody counterrevolution. It has killed at least 3,000 people, imprisoned tens of thousands and sentenced more than 1,000 political prisoners to death.

The dramatic experience of the Egyptian Revolution shows the crucial significance of revolutionary leadership. In Egypt, all the necessary conditions for a revolution were present, except for one: a revolutionary party that fights for an international socialist perspective. The mass uprisings were able to topple dictators and destabilize the political elite. But they were unable to oust the military, end capitalist exploitation and oppression and defeat imperialism.

Workers in Egypt and throughout the entire Middle East and North Africa must draw the political lessons. Sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International must be built to unify all workers—Jewish and Arab alike—in the region and internationally in a common class struggle against imperialism, Zionism and the Arab bourgeoisie. Based on this perspective the masses of the Middle East will be able to reignite the revolution to overthrow the dictatorial regimes in the region and successfully lead the struggle against war and for socialism.



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