

US Intervention in the “Arab Spring”

Written by Asad AbuKhalil

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ASAD ABUKHALIL, AUG 28 2012

It is fair to say that the West has not stopped intervening in Arab affairs since the fall of the Ottoman Empire (and prior, of course). And it is fair to say that the US decided since the late 1950s to become the main hegemon in the Arab world. The Eisenhower stance vis-à-vis the tripartite invasion of Egypt was not about protection of Egyptian sovereignty but about the assertion of US power in the Middle East. Eisenhower wanted to show France and Britain that the old rules of the game don't apply anymore: that WWII produced a new super power in the region.

The US is the main spoiler in the Middle East, and it has been intervening throughout the Cold War. But its intervention has become more brazen and more destructive after the end of the Cold War. It would be fair to generalize that the US has always intervened on the side of the most reactionary forces and that the US since the Cold War, has fought against secular and progressive forces. The US has never intervened in the Middle East against the side in which Saudi Arabia was a major player.

But Western intervention changed names over the years. The US decided to bomb and support autocratic regimes in the names of “freedom” during the Cold War. So the Gulf regimes—some of the most archaic and repressive forms of government in the world—were supported and armed in the face of progressive forces in the name of freedom, while democratic forces in the Arab world were fought and undermined, also in the name of freedom. Western powers were obsessed with oil and with the preservation of the Israeli occupation at all costs. The US also wanted to replace European colonial powers as the dominant force in the region.

The rise of Islamist forces was in fact at least partly due to the Western intervention. Let us not forget that Afghanistan under communism was one of the most progressive and feminist-friendly regimes among Muslim countries, despite its oppression. The Western powers and Saudi Arabia organized a global Jihadi Islamist force that fought a brutal war against communism: the rest of the story is too well-known to be re-told here. But the intervention succeeded in establishing rules by the US: that the spread of its influence has no ties whatsoever to its declared slogans about spreading ideas of freedom and democracy. The US-led war in Afghanistan produced the Taliban rule in that country and the phenomenon of Bin Laden.

In recent years, the US has become more reckless and indiscriminate in its use of force to spread its influence in the region. Sep. 11 was a watershed: the US felt unrestrained in the pursuit of its goals of global domination. Russia and China, until the Syrian crisis, did not challenge the US in its extended wars and occupations in the Middle East lands. In Bush's year, the use of force was the only method to impose the will of the US and to intimidate the enemies of US and Israel.

But the American military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan showed the limits of US powers: despite brutal application of force on such a mass level, the US had to humiliatingly withdraw from Iraq, while its representatives in Afghanistan are pleading with the Taliban to enter into the negotiations with the US to prepare for the final withdrawal of the US from that country. The US discovered that military force can't buy influence and smash opposition to its wars and policies among Arabs and Muslims.

However, Obama did not deviate from the path of Bush-Cheney in foreign policy. Aware of the thinness of his majority in Congress, Obama quickly emerged as a firm believer in the use of military force (against Muslims,

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primarily) in international policies. He not only increased the military involvement of the US in Afghanistan, but he also expanded US covert wars in Mali, Somalia, and Yemen. But Obama's biggest challenge was facing the series of Arab uprisings that have swept the region for the last year and a half.

Obama did what any US president since WWII had done: he stood by US clients in the region and increased arms shipments to weakening regimes. In every case, the US government stood by the reliable dictators. In the case of Egypt, the US supported Mubarak until that support became untenable. The “reform” plan that was proposed by the US government was to install the head of the secret police as his successor. In Tunisia, Obama stood by Bin Ali, until the latter fled the country to Saudi Arabia, only then did Obama ask for his resignation. In Libya and Syria, the US felt that it could feign support for democracy when it had security cooperation between the two regimes over the decades. But Syria is a close ally of Iran and Hizbullah, and Israel wished that the developments in Syria could be used to weaken its foes in the region.

American intervention is still predicated on the same foundations that determined the courses of US foreign policy during the Cold War:

- 1) staunch and diminished support for Israeli occupation and aggression in the region
- 2) the insistence that Israel alone should possess WMDs in the region
- 3) support for the various dictatorships in the Middle East which serve as reliable clients of the US
- 4) the sponsorship of the Gulf tyrannies in order to control the supply and price of oil in the world
- 5) the projection of US force in order to kill the enemies of the US and Israel
- 6) the continuation of the war on terrorism which allow the US to conduct covert operations throughout the region
- 7) the opposition to real democratization and liberation in the Arab region because this would disturb the state of relations with Israel and would undermine the two peace treaties that two Arab regimes have with Israel.

US intervention is likely to continue and to expand but the region is undergoing a seismic transformation the likes of which have not been seen since the formation of the nation states after WWI with French and British designs. The US may realize at last that its desire to control the region and its natural resources run counter to the aspirations of the people of the region. No amount of vast violence can alter that reality.

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