

# Arab Spring: triumph of the counter-revolution?

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In this new introduction to the Theses on revolution and counter-revolution in the Arab Spring, Marcus Halaby looks at the reversals suffered by progressive forces across the Middle East.

?There is no use closing one's eyes to the advance of the forces of counterrevolution?. First published in the Spring of 2014 in the Theses on the Middle East and North Africa, this statement is brought into even sharper focus by the events of the last six months.

These theses log the bloody reverses and decline in the social forces ? the youth and the workers ? that initiated the ?Arab Spring? revolutions in 2011. They note the takeover of the resistance by powerful counterrevolutionary elements, as well as the re-establishment of military regimes. Yet equally the theses assert that these revolutions ?are not yet completely exhausted?, and that ?the forces of counter-revolution are neither omnipotent nor firmly in control?.

Several months on the causes for such optimism are diminished. The further consolidation of the Egyptian military regime following Abdel Fattah el-Sisi?s fraudulent ?election? to the Presidency in June 2014, the survival and strengthening of the Assad regime, the rapid advance over the summer and autumn in Syria and in Iraq of the forces of Islamic State (IS) and the weakening of the secular and popular forces within Syria?s ravaged cities all combine to produce a bleak picture. Fighters from previously secular and ?moderate? Islamist forces alike have gone over to IS or to Jabhat al-Nusra in order to access supplies and weapons previously unavailable to them.

In Syria, Assad?s de facto truce with Washington, in return for his tacit cooperation with in the air attacks on IS, has freed his hands to attack the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other ?moderate? forces in Aleppo, eastern Damascus and the Lebanese border areas. The decimated democratic forces of the Syrian revolution are caught between a rock and a hard place, receiving little or no help from outside. The Saudis and the Arab Gulf states have largely reserved their assistance for the ?moderate? Islamists.

Western leftists have increasingly focused their hopes on Rojava, the string of autonomous Kurdish enclaves along the Turkish border. Even if its supposed model of a stateless commune is not what its anarchist supporters imagine, there is clearly a more successful popular and democratic armed resistance there. But as we pointed out at the time, Rojava largely stood aside from the Syrian revolution and for that reason was largely spared attack by the Assad regime.

Since Sisi?s 3 July 2013 coup, over 2,500 have been killed in state-sponsored political violence, and reports of torture are widespread amongst the 16,000 political prisoners. With its mass trials and mass death sentences, Sisi?s regime is an even harsher dictatorship than that of Hosni Mubarak. The support that he draws from bourgeois Egyptian ?liberals? and from the ?democratic? imperialists abroad does not mitigate this fact. Israel at least is consistent in supporting Sisi?s dictatorship ? just as it did Mubarak?s.

Is defeat for the Arab Revolutions complete?

So is it still possible to maintain that the Arab revolutions have not totally succumbed to the tide of counterrevolution? Certainly, the counterrevolution has made giant steps forward in 2014 ? but it is not yet complete. In economic and social conditions of great instability, the counterrevolutionary regimes are not yet so firmly in the saddle than they can rest easy in it.

Even in Egypt, Sisi's regime is not yet a ?totalitarian? dictatorship; it has not yet smashed and driven underground the (non-Islamist) opposition parties, the left groups and the trade unions. This is partly because the liberal parties, sections of the left and the independent trade unions actually supported his coup. His regime's victims are largely drawn from the camp of the Muslim Brotherhood, who have tried to take to the streets against the repression, alongside a few courageous leftists who have also spoken out against it.

In Tunisia, the first of the Arab countries to overthrow its dictatorship, the ruling classes' attempt to restore order has taken the form of a neoliberal government resting on a still formally bourgeois democratic system, albeit one where opposition to attacks on the living standards of workers, the lower middle class and the urban poor is inflected with Islamist demagoguery.

One reason for this is the fact that Ben Ali's dictatorship also was not ?totalitarian? like those of Assad or Gaddafi. There was always a ?legal? and formally independent trade union-based workers' movement. The Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), with powerful local organisations and democratic and left wing forces amongst the rank and file, came to the fore in the revolution and resisted the measures of the Islamist Ennahada-led governments of Hamadi Jebali and Ali Laarayedh. This strength of the working class movement accounts in large measure for the parliamentary and presidential elections held this year, which were universally judged to be free and fair.

The electoral triumph over Ennahada of the secularist Nidaa Tounes (?Tunisia's Call?) party, supported by former members of Ben Ali's Constitutional Democratic Rally and by the national employers' association UTICA, was also partly due to the UGTT's support. While doubtlessly welcomed by some progressive forces, this outcome contains within it the dangers inherent in all regimes of class collaboration. Economic conditions and the pressure of international business and financial institutions will demand harsh measures to reform the economy in the interest of capital.

This ?secular liberal? government could therefore rapidly become unpopular and the forces of Islamism make a strong comeback. The temptation will then be for liberals and leftists to call for the intervention of the military on the Egyptian model ? a real disaster as events in Egypt should have proved beyond dispute.

The bleak alternatives facing Tunisia, of following Egypt and Bahrain towards the restoration of the remnants of the ancient regime, or of following Libya and Syria into the bloody chaos of civil war, will be determined by whether the Tunisian working class can achieve political independence and strike out for power in the form of a workers' government. The outcome will also be as influenced by external events in the rest of the Arab region and beyond as by the internal dynamics of the class struggle at home.

Has the USA re-established control?

One of the most common themes of those who have written off the Arab revolutions for over a year is that the current counterrevolutionary wave is simply a matter of the reassertion of authority by US imperialism and its regional clients.

This view is most commonly stated in reference to Libya, where the NATO intervention against Gaddafi during the uprising and civil war is blamed for the country's failure to establish a stable and functioning bourgeois democracy. Even more is this argument deployed in Syria, where these critics hold the USA and EU, along with their Turkish and Gulf Arab allies, responsible for the 'militarisation' of the Syrian revolution, as if this 'militarisation' were not itself a product of the Assad regime's own brutal resort to force against unarmed mass protests.

The advocates of this view range along a spectrum of confusion. At one end of it, there are those who regard the Syrian and Libyan revolutions as little more than products of a Western imperialist 'conspiracy', an attempt to destroy an anti-imperialist camp that includes not just Assad and Gaddafi but also Robert Mugabe's brutal regime and Putin's authoritarian and repressive rule in Russia.

On the other end, there are those bourgeois pacifists for whom Libya's post-revolutionary chaos is confirmation that Libya was not 'ready for democracy' to begin with. Their parallel assessment of Syria's descent into civil war to them is proof that the Syrian revolution, however justified it might have been initially, inevitably became little more than a proxy war between equally reactionary regional powers the minute that it took up arms. From this standpoint, many of them called from the beginning of Syria's civil war for a negotiated settlement with the Assad regime, to bring the bloodshed to an end and to hold back the threat of external intervention.

This view is so far wide of the mark that it deserves special comment. In the first place, it fails to make any significant distinction between the clients of the imperialist powers and mere proxies of them, as if states like Egypt, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE or even Israel did not have concerns and interests of their own, or sufficient economic and military autonomy to assert them, even at the cost of inconvenience to or outright defiance of their imperialist masters.

But this also raises one of the most significant features of the period that we are living through. As our theses mention, this is the first great wave of revolutions to have taken place since the collapse of the USSR and its European satellites in 1989-91. These revolutions have erupted in conditions of a developing 'multipolar' global order, or rather disorder. For all the aggressive thrusts by US imperialism 'against left populist governments in South America, against oil-rich nationalist regimes in the Middle East (Iraq, Iran, Libya), and now in Ukraine against Russia' events demonstrate a clear tendency towards decline in the USA's global dominance.

This has affected the fate of the Arab revolutions. The US-led Western imperialist bloc is no longer the only game in town. Russia, China, and their client states like Iran are now just as capable of influencing events across the region as the traditional Saudi-Israeli axis once was, while the old Western client regimes now feel more free to engage in adventures and rivalries of their own, in the knowledge that they can now find alternative patrons if they really need them.

Even Egypt's Sisi, unquestionably a representative of the 'pro-Western' (and indeed the 'pro-Saudi') camp in the Arab world, felt the need to seek Russian support for his regime in the immediate aftermath of his July 2013 coup. The merest hesitation from the USA in recognising his government's legitimacy, and in supporting its bloody suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood, made him grateful for Russian President Vladimir Putin's fulsome support.

The developing Saudi-Qatari rivalry, and Turkey's 'neo-Ottoman' shift under Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP), are symptoms of this relative decline of the former US hegemon, and of its hold over its clients and allies in this emerging multipolar world.

The most startling example was the willingness of Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia to arm their own rival clients within the Syrian opposition, despite the handwringing and tut-tutting of the Obama administration. Obama, after all, had sought a negotiated settlement with Assad up until the FSA's first spectacular attack on the Assad regime's military intelligence headquarters in Harasta in November 2011, and his administration still continued to hope for a 'Yemeni-style' diplomatic deal over Syria with Russia and China up until the FSA's first entry into Damascus and Aleppo in July 2012.

It would, however, be completely crass to ignore the fact that this also means an increased role for the recovering Russian and rising Chinese imperialist powers. Indeed, as our theses state, Putin's protection of the Assad regime in the UN Security Council, its continual supply of weapons, aid and credit, and the role of its Iranian client regime in ensuring the intervention of Lebanese Hezbollah fighters, Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Shia-sectarian Iraqi militia together have constituted 'the primary imperialist intervention in Syria'. Even what we describe as 'the verbal posturing of Obama, Cameron or Hollande' has died away. This is now even more the case since the US-led air strikes against IS that began in September 2014.

Even here though, it is worth taking stock of the measure of US decline. US President Barack Obama, having been humbled by Putin in August 2013, forced into backing away from a limited bombing action in Syria, is now implementing a policy in Syria that is far more favourable to Russia and to its Syrian client: bombing Assad's enemies for him, including those hostile to and with no connection to IS, and keeping a respectful distance from Assad's forces while the latter bomb IS and the rest of the Syrian armed opposition as well.

Obama and Assad are in effect now brothers in arms, something that Assad's state media are much more forthright about than Obama's Western supporters and detractors alike – or Assad's 'anti-imperialist' apologists in the West, for that matter. At the same time the USA is reinforcing the Shia-sectarian Iraqi government, an Iranian client regime.

Similarly, the single biggest threat to the credibility of the US-led anti-IS intervention in Syria and Iraq was the risk that the Syrian Kurdish enclave of Kobane, held by the Kurdish nationalist Democratic Union Party (PYD), might fall to IS forces while the imperialist coalition concentrated on stabilising Iraq.

Having declared in October 2014, in the person of US Deputy National Security Advisor Tony Blinkin, that the priority was Iraq, a country with which the USA has 'a partnership', and which unlike Syria had 'a government we can work with', Obama has since been forced, not so much by popular pressure as by the logic of his position, to allow the relief of Kobane by a combination of tactical airstrikes and the arrival of Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga forces. The Iraqi Kurdish almost-state ruled by Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party is the USA's most reliable ally in Iraq, and no friend of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey whose Syrian equivalents run Rojava.

But even then, it was not until after Turkey had extracted its pound of flesh from Obama and his European allies that Barzani's peshmerga were allowed into Kobane. Up until then, Turkey had prevented the entry into Kobane from Turkish territory of Kurdish and other volunteers who sought to help Rojava's beleaguered militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG). Turkish forces also bombed PKK targets in Daglica near the border with Iraq.

#### Inter-imperialist conflicts

Turkey and Saudi Arabia alike have often been dismissed as lackeys of US imperialism. But today it seems that they are tails increasingly willing to have a go at wagging the dog – and with some success.

And while this necessarily has certain limits, it creates serious complications for the still dominant but declining US-UK-NATO imperialist axis, challenges that its rulers thought had become a thing of the past in the 'unipolar' world that emerged out of the immediate aftermath of the USSR's collapse.

Indeed, Erdogan has been quite vocal about Turkey's increasingly independent ambitions, declaring in a 27 November speech to the economic standing committee of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) that the Western powers like 'the conflicts, fights and quarrels of the Middle East' but don't much like its inhabitants; that foreigners love only the 'oil, gold, diamonds, and the cheap labor force of the Islamic world' and that 'Only we [the Islamic world] can solve our problems'.

Adding that 'They look like friends, but they want us dead, they like seeing our children die', he called for 'unity, solidarity and alliance' to overcome 'the crisis in the Islamic world', claiming that this would 'end the loneliness of Palestine which has continued for nearly one century' and also 'end the bloodshed in Iraq and killing of Syrian children'.

In his most provocative comment, he asked of US Vice President Joe Biden, who had visited Turkey the previous week: 'Why is somebody coming to this region from 12,000 kilometers away?', adding that 'we are against impertinence, recklessness and endless demands'.

Despite Turkey's antagonistic stance on Syria, Russian media nevertheless reported these comments favorably; and it is partly thanks to Russia and China's rise relative to the USA that states like Turkey can start to throw their own weight around in this way.

Leftists who imagine that there is only one imperialist bloc at work in today's Middle East are therefore blind to reality, and indeed are those who see Russian imperialism, and only Russian imperialism, at work in Ukraine.

The rival imperialist blocs for all their differences do however have one common aim: to bring the Arab revolutions to an end, albeit in a way that will advance their own interests at the expense of their rivals. Even so, the dire social and economic situation of the masses across the region, which could be exacerbated further if there is a new global recession, means that they and their future clients will face much the same problems as the ancient regimes did in keeping a lid on the masses' discontent.

Where our assessment of the Arab revolutions' geopolitical context is most likely to annoy those Stalinists and their 'Trotskyist' imitators who have learnt nothing and forgotten nothing since the collapse of 'actually existing socialism' in the former Soviet bloc, our assessment of the Arab revolutions' internal problems and dynamics will doubtless also annoy their self-styled polar opposites, that broad spectrum of libertarian, postmodernist and academic leftists for whom the jubilant crowds in Cairo's Tahrir Square heralded a new paradigm of 'leaderless revolutions', without parties and even without real aspirations to political power.

Most of their equivalents in Egypt - at least for the decisive weeks of its execution - shamefully became cheerleaders for Sisi's military coup, as a supposed continuation of the 25 January 2011 revolution. Some would later find themselves becoming secondary targets of its repression.

And here, it is probably Egypt's situation that has provided the masses with the cruellest lessons about the limitations of 'people power' without organisations or political programmes. Mass, multi-class street-based movements managed to 'bring down' two Presidents in a row. But the fate of the revolution opened up by the first of these two movements was still ultimately decided by a struggle between the two major organised forces in Egyptian society: the military-industrial oligarchy with its coercive and economic

tentacles extending into almost all spheres of social existence, and the pro-capitalist Muslim Brotherhood, with its plebeian mass following largely sympathetic to the revolution.

There was only one alternative social force that could have prevented this outcome: not just 'the youth' and not just an amorphous 'people' but the working class, whose actions at the point of production in January 2011 made Mubarak's downfall inevitable.

Organised into a political party, its most politically conscious elements could have helped to build a nationwide network of popular councils as an alternative source of political power and popular legitimacy, which in turn could have drawn in not just other workers and their families but the urban and rural poor in general. In this way, they could both have begun to erode the Muslim Brotherhood's near-monopoly on oppositional and 'democratic' politics outside of Egypt's major urban centres, and also ensured that the question of political power, once raised by any renewal of mass protest, would not be a question that could be answered only by the army.

Such a party, if one is ever built, will have to base itself on a strategy of bringing the organised working class to the head of the struggles of the oppressed and exploited masses, for bread and for democracy, as the only component of those masses with stable objective interests that transcend their sectional or particularistic interests, and with them their tendency to disintegrate into competing factions at the first serious hurdle.

For this reason, we have also had to oppose the tendency towards a rejection of explicitly class-based politics that is another key feature of the fashionable 'new thinking', and with it the tendency of many on the left to adapt their strategy to those allegedly non-class (and in reality bourgeois-led cross-class) forces, like the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, that have been amongst the first beneficiaries of the revolutionary upsurge.

The mantra that these are 'democratic revolutions', something perfectly true with regard to their immediate objective tasks, is chanted repeatedly as an objection to the key Marxist principle of working class political independence, as if the 'democratic' character of these revolutions puts the class struggle into suspended animation for the whole duration of the struggle for democracy. Here again, the 'new thinking' is in fact a relapse into past strategies that have been tried and tested and found wanting many times before, in this case the strategy of the 'revolution in stages', once championed by the Menshevik wing of Russian Social Democracy and later revived by Stalinism.

Finally, it is worth reiterating that working class leadership of the democratic struggle, while it may be the only ultimate guarantee of that struggle's victory, also carries with it consequences of its own: the struggle for a new type of society altogether, one without classes, exploitation, private property and ultimately also without a state; in a word, socialism. And it is in the hope of furthering this struggle that we should continue our work.

As the experience of the Russian Revolution of 1905 shows, even when great revolutionary upheavals meet with defeat, this rarely if ever simply means a return to what existed before. While the agency of revolution, the social forces that made it, may suffer terrible repressions, death and imprisonment, and while the masses, forced off the streets by a recovered reaction may retreat into private life for a period lasting years, the lessons of their past defeats and victories are still burned deep into their consciousness.

The Arab revolutions that began in 2011, even if they suffer a final defeat, can still become as in Lenin's famous words the great 'dress rehearsal' for something even grander, an October 1917 for the entire Arab world. Though the media of the regimes, and of the imperialist powers East and West may rejoice

that that Order prevails today in Cairo (and tomorrow perhaps in Damascus), we should remember the words of Rosa Luxemburg in her final article:

“Order prevails in Berlin! You foolish lackeys! Your “order” is built on sand. Tomorrow the revolution will rise up again, clashing its weapons,” and to your horror it will proclaim with trumpets blazing: I was, I am, I shall be!

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**Source URL:** <https://fifthinternational.org/content/arab-spring-triumph-counter-revolution>