

Theses on the Middle East and North Africa

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Middle East and North Africa Theses: revolution and counter-revolution in the Arab Spring. Adopted by International Executive Committee, June 29th, 2014

A. Revolution and counter-revolution in the Arab world

1. The third anniversary of the outbreak of the Arab Revolutions provided little cause for celebrations. Events in Egypt, Syria and Libya indicated the advance in various forms of a counterrevolution that has crushed most of the hopes and achievements of 2011

2. In Egypt, after the coup against elected President Mohamed Morsi, led by army commander Abdel Fattah el-Sisi on July 3, 2013, a campaign of bloody reprisals was launched against the Muslim Brotherhood. In August, hundreds were killed by the army in clearing the protest camps in Rabaa Al-Adawiya and al-Nahda squares.

3. On the third anniversary of the revolution, the police and the military killed over 50 MB supporters. Supporters of the youth organisations that sparked the revolution were beaten and pepper sprayed off the streets to prevent them reaching Tahrir Square. This potent symbol of popular power was reserved for those calling for el-Sisi to stand for President. The activists who led the January 25 Revolution, like Ahmed Maher Ahmed Douma and Mohamed Adel of the 6 April, have been arrested and jailed for organising demonstrations without police permission.

4. Thousands have been detained and there are reports of widespread torture and illegal killings. A court has sentenced 528 Morsi supporters to death; with over 700 similar trials in the pipeline. Even where these sentences are commuted, they mark an intensity of repression that former dictator Hosni Mubarak did not dare attempt. The fact of el-Sisi's election as President only emphasises the profoundly counterrevolutionary character of the events since the July coup. That coup was due, in no small measure, to the support not only of bourgeois liberals like Mohamed El Baradei and Hamdeen Sabbahi, but also from many of the confused revolutionaries of 2011.

5. In Syria, the regime of Bashar Al-Assad and its Russian, Iranian and Lebanese backers have transformed revolution into a bloody civil war. Estimates of the dead range from 100,000 to 150,000. Two million refugees have fled the country, two thirds of them women and children. In addition, 4 million people are internally displaced. In a country of 22.5 million people, one quarter have been driven from their homes.

6. Russian imperialism's veto in the Security Council and its supply of weapons and other logistical support to Assad, plus the intervention of battle hardened Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon and Revolutionary Guards from Iran, have been crucial to the successes of this counterrevolution. To date, this remains the primary imperialist intervention in Syria, not the verbal posturing of Obama, Cameron or Hollande.

7. They have rendered the anti-Assad rebellion very little material support. Indeed, their fear of inadvertently arming ?Al Qaeda?, that is, any radical Islamist fighters, has prevented them arming anybody. What support there has been has come from Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey who, in this respect, are far from being mere puppets of the White House as testified to by the fact that their aid has gone to the various strands of Islamists that stand closest to them and which the US fear more than they fear the Assad regime.

8. However, the large numbers of Sunni jihadis, indigenous and foreign, such as the Al-Nusra Front and the even more vicious Sunni-sectarian ISIS, whether or not they are fighting Assad, act as a "counterrevolution within the revolution", committing communalist atrocities and attacking the Free Syrian Army and the local revolutionary committees. They, too, indicate the powerful reactionary reflux afflicting the revolutions of the Arab Spring. The present ISIS offensive in Iraq has no progressive content whatsoever. Rather, it has the character of an all out sectarian civil war, although revolutionaries must condemn and oppose any intervention by the US and its allies, or by Iran, to prop up the no less reactionary Maliki regime.

9. In Bahrain, the activists of 2011 still languish in jail, most famously the Bahrain Thirteen. In Libya, Islamist and tribal forces fight over the spoils of the revolution and in the other Arab countries a deadly silence reigns.

10. Only in Tunisia are the forces of the trade unions, the youth and the left, successfully fighting off the attacks both of the Feloul (remnants of the old regime) and Islamist counterrevolutionaries. Even here, however, they have run an enormous political danger by supporting an interim government that is pledged to carry out IMF "reforms". Without political class independence and anti-capitalism, the strength of the Tunisian workers could also be sapped by the Islamist demagoguery of more radical salafist movements like Ansar al-Sharia, active amongst the unemployed and the poor.

11. In the Huffington Post, Al Jazeera's senior political analyst, Marwan Bishara, recently observed, "The terrible setbacks in both of these important Arab nations have largely dimmed the excitement over the revolution and undermined the promise of change, when change has brought even more instability, violence and despair." Many prominent activists, especially those in Egypt who have been imprisoned for protesting against the repression that has followed el-Sisi's July 3 coup, have voiced their desperation at events that seem to have overturned their hopes.

12. Ahmed Maher, founder of the April 6 movement has written that "Everything collapsed". Addressing a future generation of youth activists, he wrote, "And instead of your generation reaping the fruits of January 25, it is now up to you to start anew after January 25 was exterminated."

13. Indeed, there is no use closing one's eyes to the advance of the forces of counterrevolution. Aided by the errors or crimes of both the Liberal and Islamist forces that were able briefly to usurp the revolutions, regimes very similar to those of pre-2011 are re-forming. What happens in Egypt in the first year or so of el-Sisi's presidency will be crucial.

14. The economic problems of the country could rapidly alienate sections of his mass base but that does not guarantee the development of an effective opposition to his rule. The opportunist and erratic policies of the independent trade unions and the left mean that there is an acute absence of any principled leadership able to elaborate a strategy of resistance to el-Sisi. Such a strategy would have to include a political direction for trade unionists, a united front with the Islamists in defence of democratic rights and against repression whilst maintaining complete political independence of them.

15. The confusion of the far left and the workers' movement is enormous. For example, the Revolutionary Socialists, having supported Morsi in 2012 to stop Ahmed Shafiq, "the candidate of the feloul", supported el Sisi's ousting of Morsi a year later. Then, in the presidential elections of 2014, after they became victims of his brutal repression themselves, they gave support to Hamdeen Sabahi, the tame oppositionist candidate who supported el-Sissi's repression of the Muslim Brotherhood. Likewise, the independent union leader, Kamal Abu-Eita, supported el-Sisi's coup and even entered his first administration as minister of labour.

16. In the other principal states of the Arab Spring, various degrees of stalemate, retreat or defeat of the genuinely revolutionary forces are equally undeniable. The democratic youth and the workers who initiated the revolutionary movements have been thrust into the background, or suffered martyrdom on a shocking scale.

17. The idea that access to the internet and satellite TV, or the use of social media, could provide the key to an irreversible democratic transformation has received a cruel refutation. Likewise, the illusion that spontaneous peaceful revolutions, without programmes or the leadership of political parties, could transform these countries, has also been refuted by events. Old bureaucratic institutions, the army, the Islamist parties, even murderous communalist terrorist groups, have been able to usurp the great mass upheavals prepared and initiated by the young.

18. It is equally wide of the mark to blame all these defeats solely on a conspiracy by US imperialism and its allies. In fact, the actions of the western powers, while totally counterrevolutionary in their goals, have proved singularly inept and ineffective. Those leftists who think that imperialism exists only in the singular can hardly understand what is going on.

19. The forces of counterrevolution have powerful support from Russian and Chinese imperialisms and their Iranian and, to some extent, Iraqi, clients. Moreover, the old allies of the US; Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Gulf states like Qatar, plus Israel, are often pursuing policies which run counter to the wishes of the US. Though often supporting opposed sides, all of these forces are seeking to impose a counterrevolution that will advance their own interests while putting an end to the Arab revolutions.

20. Yet, despite bloody reverses and political confusion and paralysis, the motive forces that began the revolutions in 2010-11 are not yet completely exhausted and the forces of counter-revolution are neither omnipotent nor firmly in control. In the year ahead, they will face the same problems as the previous regimes experienced; the difficulty of meeting the urgent economic and social needs of the broad masses. In Syria, the very reliance of Assad on Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah fighters and his resort to fomenting sectarian massacres, indicate that his forces remain at full stretch.

21. In Egypt, Abdel Fattah el Sisi has only established himself thanks to an unholy and unstable alliance of the feloul and the Liberals who, unable to generate a social base of their own, went "for a ride on the tiger" of the military high command. As the masses become undeceived by the actions of the government, its attacks on the trade unions and strikes and its continued repression of the left, larger and larger numbers will realise that they have installed not a new Nasser but a new Mubarak.

22. Even if counterrevolution triumphs in Syria and Egypt, or in Tunisia, and a fraudulent capitalist "democracy" is institutionalised in a form far from the dreams of the young revolutionaries of three ago, these great "people's revolutions" (Lenin's term) will leave an indelible imprint on the region and prepare the way for greater events to come. Just as the Russian Revolution of 1905 proved, albeit twelve years later, the dress rehearsal for a far greater revolution.

23. The task of revolutionary socialists in the Middle East and North Africa and worldwide is to analyse the rich experience and learn the lessons of the past three years. Key issues include; the relationship of the youth to the working class and the other oppressed and exploited layers of the population; their capacity to help build revolutionary organisations; the role of trade unions, old and new, in a revolution; the role of the general strike; the attitude to the army and the contradiction between its high command and officer caste and the rank and file soldiers; Islamist political parties and their liberal pro-capitalist enemies and how not to be used/abused by either; the role of potential bonapartes from the diplomatic and even entertainment worlds; above all, the need for a mass revolutionary working class party that can pose, and answer, the questions of government, of power for the youth and the working class in order to achieve social justice and political freedom.

24. It is also necessary to examine the decisions made by the revolutionary forces at critical conjunctures; both those that were correct and courageous, and the serious mistakes, such as the support for Morsi and el-Sisi cited above. Different, even conflicting, forces of counterrevolution, foreign and domestic, have taken advantage of such errors. The task is to fight for fidelity to fundamental principles and the strategic and tactical answers that are still possible and could turn the counter-revolutionary tide if the masses adopted them. Even if the events of 2013-2014 prove to have brought an end to the revolutionary period, opening up a period of counter-revolutionary reaction, the need to learn the lessons of the Arab Spring will be critical for the inevitable next wave of revolution in the region.

B. The revolutionary character of the Arab Spring

1. Lenin's well-known analysis of the conditions that give rise to revolutions applies fully to the Arab Revolutions of 2011. They occur, he said, when the exploited and oppressed classes "do not want to live in the old way", and when, in addition to this, the upper classes are unable "to rule and govern in the old way"; when "it is impossible for the ruling classes to maintain their rule without any change", leading to "a crisis in the policy of the ruling class", which creates "a fissure through which the discontent and indignation of the oppressed classes burst forth".

2. This applies with full force to the situation in the Arab countries in the years, indeed the decade, immediately preceding the explosion of the winter/spring of 2010-11. In many Arab countries, especially in Egypt, whose regime's complicity with Israel and the USA was all too obvious, there were student and unemployed youth demonstrations in solidarity with the young fighters of the second Palestinian intifada in 2000-2002.

3. The high period of globalisation placed many Arab states in crippling financial dependence on the imperialist centres through private FDI and IMF/WB and US-EU loans. The conditions for these loans obliged them to open up their economies even further, privatise industries and services and run down the very limited welfare systems, price controls, food and fuel subsidies etc. that had been introduced by the nationalist regimes between the 1950s and 1970s.

4. Then, the feverish boom of 2005-07 that ended this phase, generated enormous food and fuel costs inflation, with no corresponding increase in wages or job opportunities for the young. This led to riots and strikes over rising prices, especially in Egypt. As Adam Hanieh states (Lineages of Revolt) "Often working a twelve hour day and having to do two jobs, Egyptian workers earn 81 percent less than workers in Turkey, 65 percent less than workers in Tunisia, 40 percent less than in India and even 15 per cent less than in Pakistan." Between 2004 and 2009, more than 1,900 protests involved 1.7 million workers in strike action.

5. The dry tinder for revolt existed in plenty as did an activist vanguard of young students and workers,

steered by the repression of the regimes but still able to work semi-legally and semi-clandestinely, in countries like Egypt and Tunisia.

6. A profound lesson can be learnt from Lenin's State and Revolution. Here he refers to "Marx's extremely profound remark that the destruction of the bureaucratic-military state machine is 'the precondition for every real people's revolution'." Lenin observes that Marx's reference to a people's revolution seemed strange (perhaps a slip of the pen) to those Marxists brought up on the Mensheviks' lifeless "antithesis between bourgeois revolution and proletarian revolution". He defines a people's revolution as one in which (a) "the mass of the people, their majority, the very lowest social groups, crushed by oppression and exploitation, rose independently and stamped on the entire course of the revolution the imprint of their own demands, their attempt to build in their own way a new society in place of the old society that was being destroyed."

7. To this he adds (b) a "people's" revolution, one actually sweeping the majority into its stream, could be such only if it embraced both the proletariat and the peasants. These two classes then constituted the "people". Such a people's revolution, providing it smashed the bureaucratic-military state machine, could be the basis of "a free alliance of the poor peasants and the proletarians, whereas without such an alliance, democracy is unstable and socialist transformation is impossible."

8. Lenin adds that not all bourgeois revolutions are people's revolutions, he cites the Young Turk officers' revolution in the Ottoman Empire, and not all people's revolutions succeed in this "smashing" and therefore fail, here he cites the 1905 revolution in Russia. It should also be underlined that Lenin emphasises that without the breaking up of the old apparatus of repression not only is an advance to socialism impossible but also the attainment of what he calls a stable democracy, that is, one ensured against counter-revolutionary overthrow.

9. The social causes of the masses' discontent were exacerbated by the global economic crisis. The years following 2008 opened the region to the blast of a world crisis unprecedented since 1945, pushing up already high real levels of unemployment especially amongst the young. This set the objective conditions for a regional revolutionary earthquake. The initial protesters raised demands attacking hunger, unemployment and inflation, but were quickly joined by trade unionists, students, teachers and lawyers, raising political demands around corruption, freedom of assembly, freedom of expression and police brutality.

10. The Tunisian demand for "dignity", a word that would later be repeated in the slogans of protesters in Syria, Egypt and elsewhere, expressed the decades-long, pent-up frustration of "ordinary" citizens with their daily humiliation by officials who routinely demanded bribes and police officers who harassed, arrested, beat up, and sometimes murdered, young people without cause and with impunity.

11. Most visible of all was the alienation of a generation of youth that had received a university education from a society in which there was no prospect of their ever being able to make use of it. Thanks to an increased access to media outside the control of their own regimes, these young people were aware of a world where people like themselves were not humiliated in this way.

12. The demands that brought "the whole people", or at least a substantial proportion of it, into the streets, were demands classically associated with the establishment of modern bourgeois democratic systems: for genuine political pluralism, the accountability of the state to its citizens in free elections, freedom from arbitrary arrest and harassment by the state's repressive organs, that is, the "rule of law?".

13. Even so, and crucially, it was the action of the urban working class that proved decisive in provoking

divisions within the state apparatus and in forcing Ben Ali's flight from Tunisia. In Egypt, too, it was the threat that the square occupations and the bloody clashes in Alexandria and Suez would be joined by a tidal wave of workers' strikes that finally convinced the military to abandon Mubarak.

14. The Arab revolutions of 2011 directly involved at least five "republican" dictatorships (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen) and one semi-absolutist monarchy (Bahrain). The countries where outbreaks were rapidly subdued, or remained minority affairs, were often those where invasions, occupations and civil wars had already exhausted the combustible material for rebellion; Algeria, Sudan, Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, etc. Nevertheless, the Arab Spring proved to be the greatest wave of revolutions since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the "actually existing socialisms" of Eastern Europe in 1989-91.

15. The particular course of each revolution or uprising was the result of certain common features combining with nationally specific features. These included not just the differing political regimes, such as traditional dynastic monarchies or military bonapartist republics, but also the different socio-economic factors underpinning oil-rentier states like Saudi Arabia, the Gulf and Libya or the more industrialised and trading economies like Egypt, Tunisia and Syria, with Iraq having features of both.

C. False revolutions but genuine counter-revolutions

1. Gene Sharp, often seen as the world's leading proponent of the concept of peaceful non-ideological revolutions, argues that it is possible to replace governments by mass mobilisations of "people power" without any revolution, in the accepted sense of the word, at all. Such "revolutions", even when they are not just conspiracies of the US and EU secret services and western "democratic and human rights" foundations and laughably misnamed Non-Governmental Organisations, are easily co-opted by the "democratic imperialisms". The colour/flower nomenclature helps to avoid any political precision as to their objectives.

2. This strategic model, supposedly confirmed by whole series of changes of government such as the "Rose Revolution" in Georgia, "Orange Revolution" in the Ukraine, "Tulip (or Pink) Revolution" in Kyrgyzstan, "Cedar Revolution" in Lebanon, and "Green Revolution" in Iran, met its match with the reality of Tunis and Cairo where the attempts to dub them the "Jasmine Revolution" and the "Lotus Revolution" signally failed. The Egyptian Revolution, in which over 800 died, was in no sense a Gene Sharp "revolution". Undaunted, the imperialist strategists set out to mimic the Occupy movement and Tahrir Square with their bogus "Maidan Revolution" which US governments financed to the tune of \$5bn.

3. In Egypt, an amorphous movement, with the simple and negative slogan "the people demand the downfall of the regime", was indeed able to "bring down" two presidents in succession, but it did not destroy the military regime behind the political facade of the presidency, the parliament, the Supreme Court etc. The army has three times shown that it knows how to transfer political office in order to avoid power falling into the hands of the people.

4. First it transferred power from Mubarak to Field Marshall Tantawi; then (grudgingly and deceitfully) it transferred power from Tantawi to Morsi. This "power" turned out to be a deadly trap for the Brotherhood. Taking advantage of a partly genuine, partly fomented, mass uprising against Morsi, once again it transferred power, this time from Morsi to Al-Sisi. Moreover, with the aid of the liberals, a section of the revolutionary youth (in Tamerod) and a media induced cult of the personality around Al Sisi, it succeeded in installing a new military bonapartist dictatorship, which was subsequently legitimised in a plebiscitary election.

5. Thus, the counter-revolutionary character of the Liberal bourgeoisie, confirmed in every revolution for a

century and a half, is currently being demonstrated in Egypt. It shows that it falls to the proletariat, as the only consistently revolutionary class created by capitalism itself, to assume the role, played in the "classical" bourgeois revolutions by the bourgeoisie or its agents, of leading and completing the democratic revolution and of making its achievements permanent. This, in turn, requires it to achieve for itself political independence as a class.

6. While the proletariat is, therefore, called upon by historic conditions to lead all the various other oppressed classes behind it, it cannot take on this leading role without satisfying its own demands, which will necessitate ?despotic inroads on the rights of property? (Communist Manifesto) and, inevitably, the overthrow of capitalism itself. To achieve this, however, requires that it become the subjective, that is, conscious, agent of social revolution.

7. In order to avoid its own ultimate defeat, the democratic revolution has to advance from the completion of democratic tasks to addressing socialist tasks. This is impossible without the smashing of the old apparatus of repression; the paramilitary police, the secret police, the spying and surveillance machinery. This ?smashing? requires, above all, the liberation of the rank and file of the armed forces from the control of their high command and officer corps. Then, and only then, can "the army and the people (be) one hand."

8. At the same time, the basis of a new democratic and proletarian order requires the democratisation of the army by soldiers' committees or councils and, parallel to this, the creation of a popular militia recruited from workers, peasants and urban poor. These must be under under the control of soldiers' and workers' committees, with the regular election of officers etc. Only thus will it be possible to prevent militias falling under the sway of tribal, Islamist, or plain criminal, elements, as we have seen in the civil wars in Libya and Syria.

9. This transformation cannot be left to a spontaneous or inevitable "process". It must be fought for consciously, first of all by a minority within the proletariat's own ranks who, in the words of the Communist Manifesto, understand clearly "the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement", in short, a revolutionary workers' party.

D. The semi-colonial army-state: the product of a weak bourgeoisie

1. Colonial occupation and economic exploitation of the most populous Arab countries followed, post-1945, by semi-colonial exploitation by the US imperialist superpower, prevented the growth of a "national bourgeoisie" in Egypt, Syria or Iraq. Although military-bonapartist regimes were able to promote some state capitalist development between the 1950s and the 1980s, they failed utterly to complete the fundamental task of achieving national independence. There has been no Arab equivalent of Italy's Piedmont or Germany's Prussia, able to expel the foreign intruders or unite the Arab world.

2. One of the most striking features of the weakness of the national bourgeoisie in the Arab states is its own abject prostration in front of a dictatorial state machine that consumes such a large part of the national income, and that defends its privileges and its political power partly at the expense of the bourgeoisie itself. This is the problem of Bonapartism, from which few, if any, Arab states (perhaps only Lebanon) have escaped.

3. Even when the "Bonapartes" who headed these regimes were sincere Arab nationalists, like Nasser or the young Gaddafi, strong on anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist rhetoric and wildly popular with the masses, the core of their regimes has always been the military caste, with democratic liberties (especially for independent unions or the parties of the left) virtually non-existent. Moreover, they all rapidly outgrew their

radical "revolutionary" origins, turning into corrupt, parasitic and stiflingly repressive regimes, often effecting a transition from an anti-US to pro-US stance in the process. Civil society, even its bourgeois élite, has remained weak and incapable of ousting these egregious "praetorian guards".

4. In Mubarak's or el-Sisi's Egypt, neither of the two major wings of the bourgeoisie, the Islamists and the "secular liberals", have proved capable of standing up to the power of the military. The army, boosted by US military and economic aid as its reward for maintaining a reactionary peace treaty with Israel, is an economic power in its own right, controlling a vast empire of enterprises that are estimated to represent up to 40 per cent of the country's economy.

5. Similarly, in Assad's Syria, a bloated military and security apparatus, ostensibly there to defend the country against Israel, and recruited partly on the basis of kinship and sectarian affiliation, stands violently and menacingly "above" society as a whole. The difference is that it relied on funds and arms initially from the Soviet Union and, later, from a newly imperialist Russia under Putin.

6. In both cases, the upper ranks of the state apparatus are partly incorporated into the bourgeoisie, either "legally" or through various forms of corruption. They use the state apparatus as a network for distributing patronage to a wider base of support located in the more plebeian classes. This gives this "army-state bourgeoisie" the ability to dominate the bourgeoisie as a whole, unproductively extracting rents from it while blackmailing it with the threat of social chaos in the event that the "private" bourgeoisie tries to clip its wings or curb its excesses.

E. The semi-colonial system and the role of imperialist powers

1. Such regimes are not just the product of internal dynamics, but of these countries' positions within the global system. The world markets are dominated by the bourgeoisies of the imperialist countries who use international institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to manipulate these markets in their favour. This ensures that the "private" bourgeoisie cannot simply "trade its way out" of its semi-colonial subordination to them, even when, as in the case of the oil-rich Arab Gulf states, it is in possession of a strategic global commodity.

2. Unable to develop strong national markets for themselves, the bourgeoisies are obliged to concede this part of their historic role to the state apparatus, which fulfils it by the creation of national monopolies. This then forms the material basis for an ideology, promoted through such channels as the mass media and the education system, in which the army itself is the "representative of the people", and therefore a source of political legitimacy in its own right. A bellicose but empty "nationalism" forms a key part of this ideology, even though the army's actual record in defending the country's national independence often contains very little to boast about.

3. Moreover, the pre-2011 Arab dictatorships collectively formed part of a regional system that was shaped by its place in the global imperialist order. Within this, Israel played the role of US imperialism's watchdog and enforcer, using its military power to punish any Arab regime that transgressed its permitted boundaries, and cutting down to size any state that threatened to break Israel's monopoly as the dominant regional power.

4. Turkey, as a NATO member and as an Israeli military ally, helped to contain "nationalist" Arab regimes like Syria and Iraq, while Saudi Arabia's oil wealth was used to fund reactionary movements, not all of them "Islamic", across the Arab world, and to prop up dictatorships like those of Mubarak and Ben Ali.

5. The oil-rich Arab Gulf states as a whole acted as a regional social "safety valve", taking in migrant

workers and otherwise under-employed professionals from the poorer and more populous Arab states, and beyond. This "safety valve" could be turned on and off, rewarding friendly regimes and punishing others, as with Saudi Arabia's expulsion of Yemeni nationals in response to their country's support for Saddam's Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War over Kuwait.

This regional system came into existence during the Cold War, and included a role for Soviet-backed "nationalist" regimes in Egypt (until Sadat's turn to the US) Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Algeria. Although Egypt's military subsequently received billions in military aid annually to maintain the 1978 Camp David Accords that marked the official end of Egypt's 30-year state of war with Israel, a series of events weakened and undermined this entire system.

First, the 1979 Iranian revolution overthrew the Shah, US imperialism's other great pillar of regional stability. This prompted the US to encourage Saddam Hussein's 1980 invasion of Iran, in the hope that Iran and Iraq would exhaust each other in the destructive eight years of war that followed. Then, the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq disrupted it even further, unintentionally strengthening Iran's position as a regional power by making the US dependent on pro-Iranian Shia politicians to ensure Iraq's pacification. In addition, since the election of Turkey's Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) in November 2002, Turkey has moved away from Israel and developed regional ambitions of its own, clashing publicly with Israel over the attack on the "Gaza Freedom Flotilla" in May 2010.

F. The Arab Spring's strategic weakness ? failing to smash the military bonapartist state

1. The failure of the initial uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia to decisively break up the state apparatus by winning over the rank and file soldiers to the people and breaking the hold of the High Command and the officer corps, necessarily allowed the core of the old regimes, to remain in existence. The ?feloul? took the opportunity to regroup, ensuring their own preservation partly by assuming the legitimacy of the revolutions that overthrew the tyrants that they themselves had previously served.

2. Most importantly, this enabled the military regimes to survive intact with all their economic assets and quasi-judicial and prison systems. Their only cost was the purging of the geriatric old guard in favour of a slightly young layer. As a result, large numbers of militants were held and even tortured in military prisons, and then tried and sentenced by military courts. This can be seen most clearly in Egypt where first Tantawi and then el Sisi have been able to preserve the army's immense power and riches without the slightest inroads being made into them, directing all the opprobrium onto the heads of the Muslim Brotherhood.

One reason for this was that the revolutionary movement limited itself to the "peaceful" tactic of square occupations, and the agitation around the slogan "the army and the people are one hand". The youthful revolutionaries picked up this combination of pacifism, illusions in the Army, lack of a clear strategy for power, and a paucity of concrete demands, from their liberal, and libertarian, mentors in the US and Europe.

Of course, a rapidly escalating revolution with a mass character cannot adopt complicated and detailed programmes, but a revolutionary leadership can, and should, focus the movement around key demands and slogans that not only express the needs of the masses but are also aimed at the regime's weak points. That was the importance of the Bolsheviks' tireless agitation around ?Bread, Peace, Land!?, ?All Power to the Soviets!?, ?Convene the Constituent Assembly Now!?, ?Workers' Control of Production!?

3. A slogan like "the army and the people are one hand" might have been a basis for fraternising with rank and file soldiers but, as long as they remained under the control of the Supreme Command of the Armed Forces, it expressed a huge self-deception and one that became critical in the days following July 30, 2013, when it was consciously used by the High Command to camouflage a counter-revolutionary coup.

4. The older revolutionary models, especially Bolshevism, which are ignored or scorned by the likes of Gene Sharpe, give far better advice: if the rank and file of the soldiers cannot be broken from the control of the officer caste and the High Command, then the "regime" whose downfall the people wished would survive the retirement of its ruling figurehead and his family. Events in Egypt and, to some extent in Tunisia and Yemen, have confirmed this.

5. In Syria, by contrast, the totalitarian state's repressive apparatus did not eject its figurehead in the interests of its own self-preservation. Instead, it merely haemorrhaged, as a flood of individual defectors from the country's conscript army began to form the core of an amorphous and poorly-equipped "armed opposition" to the Ba'athist regime, loosely grouped together in the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

6. The domestic bourgeoisie, itself partly dependent for its wealth on its maintenance of a corrupt relationship with the state, remained solidly behind the Assad regime, thereby reinforcing its own subjection to it. Its "oppositional" cousins in exile have tried to compensate for their own weakness and inability to influence events on the ground by appealing to the Western imperialist powers for support, vainly pleading with them to intervene militarily on their behalf.

7. They were cowed not just by the Assad regime's almost unlimited capacity for violence against its own people, but also by the fear that the masses, having armed themselves in self-defence, would prove unwilling to return to "normal" conditions in the event that they overthrew the Assad regime by their own efforts.

G. Nationalism and Internationalism

1. Against the background of a common cultural inheritance and language, the rise of nationalism in the 20th century naturally generated an aspiration towards a single Arab nation, pan-Arab nationalism. This strategic goal was also adopted by the early Communist parties and maintained through the period of their Stalinisation. Pan-Arab nationalism was also utilised by the imperialist powers, most particularly Britain and France, in their manoeuvres against the collapsing Ottoman Empire. However, as soon as victory was achieved, these powers immediately betrayed their Arab allies and divided up the region under the guise of League of Nations Mandates.

2. The reality of the Balkanisation of the region ensured the crystallisation of ruling classes and military elites in the "artificial" states whose borders, drawn up by bureaucrats in Europe, ignored the cultural and ethnic identities of the populations of the entire region. Nonetheless, pan-Arab nationalism survived as an aspiration amongst the popular classes, giving rise, even today, to a spontaneous identification with, and sympathy for, the struggles of the oppressed across the region.

3. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the region became a key interface between the western imperialist powers, led by the USA, and the "Soviet Bloc". Although both sides had their sphere of influence and key allies among the ruling classes, the lynchpin of the system was the creation of Israel and its principal victims were the Palestinians. Inevitably, as the balance of power in the world changed over the decades, so this "system" underwent sometimes radical re-alignments, as with Egypt's re-orientation away from the Soviet Union towards the USA. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, however, presaged a more fundamental shift.

4. The Arab revolutions have thrown up new challenges to this regional system. Oil-rich Qatar, the most apparently "stable" Gulf autocracy, allowed its pet television station Al Jazeera to act as the "voice" of the Arab revolutions, loudly cheering the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, and playing a key role in agitating for NATO's intervention into the civil war that took place in Libya between the February 2011 Benghazi

uprising and Gaddafi's overthrow six months later.

5. Qatar is now effectively competing with Saudi Arabia for the role of chief political and financial sponsor of the pro-Western Arab regimes. In place of Saudi Arabia's preference for preserving apparently strong, but now visibly brittle, dictatorships, Qatar hopes to become godfather to somewhat more flexible and durable pro-Western pseudo-democracies. This Saudi-Qatari rivalry is at its most visible in Egypt, where the Saudis supported the overthrow of Morsi and el-Sisi's dictatorship closed down Al Jazeera's local affiliates.

6. All the same, Qatar did not oppose, and indeed took part in, the March 2011 Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) intervention in support of Bahrain's monarchy, as its quid pro quo for NATO's intervention in Libya. The rapid spread of the Arab uprisings and the mutual sympathy between the various countries where they took place has to be understood against this background. It also highlights a fundamentally important issue; the need for the revolutionaries of the region to learn from one another's struggles, their mistakes and disasters as well as their victories.

They will only maximise the advantages to be gained from this if they can create a powerful organisational unity among themselves and, indeed, with revolutionaries around the world. This would allow the creation of national parties and programmes independent of local developments. Periods of repression and exile could be used as fruitfully as they were by the Russian revolutionary exiles before 1917. In other words, the workers and socialists of the Middle East need not just politically independent working class revolutionary parties but a new revolutionary International.

H. Inter-imperialist rivalries sow confusion

1. The restoration of capitalism in both Russia and China, and their emergence as 'Great Powers', that is, imperialist powers, has produced widespread confusion on the international Left. Not recognising the significance of the transformation of the class character of these states has meant that many continue to view international confrontations and conflicts through the prism of the Cold War, with a 'socialist camp' on one side and the imperialist 'West', primarily the USA, on the other.

2. When applied to the convulsions of the 'Arab Spring', this template led many to derive their attitudes towards the different forces involved from those forces' relationship to the Cold War camps, rather than from their class content and programme.

3. In Libya, for example, when the revolutionary movement against Gaddafi's regime proved unable to remove him, the USA, despite the fact that Gaddafi had long ago made his peace with the West and abandoned even the rhetoric of anti-imperialism, decide to intervene to ensure his overthrow. In this, Washington was learning from its mistakes in Egypt and Tunisia where it initially backed Mubarak and Ben Ali against unstoppable revolutionary movements.

4. That error had severely restricted the US ability to influence the outcome of the revolutions. In Libya, the very clear intention was to back those elements of the anti-Gaddafi movement who could be expected to become compliant 'allies' and thus thwart any further radicalisation. In response to this, some on the Left concluded that Gaddafi continued to represent 'anti-imperialism' because, in their world view, there was only one imperialism, the USA and its allies. This then led them to characterise the whole of the anti-Gaddafi movement as 'pro-imperialist'.

Others, seduced by the idea that, in the 21st century, revolutions consisted of mass mobilisations that could peacefully overthrow tyrants, concluded that the revolutionary potential of the anti-Gaddafi movement had been exhausted when it developed into revolutionary civil war. They, therefore, characterised that war as some kind of 'tribal war' in which sides could not be taken.

5. To complete this picture of international confusion, yet others, recognising the continued democratic impulse of the revolution, opted to drop their principled opposition to NATO. Echoing the 'social imperialism' of a century earlier, they believed that intervention by the 'democratic imperialisms' was the only way to ensure the victory of the anti-Gaddafi forces.

6. The same errors would be repeated on an even bigger scale in Syria, this time without even the excuse of any direct Western intervention, and it was in Syria that the decline of US power, and the counter-revolutionary role of the rising Russian and Chinese imperialisms, became visible. Putin's humiliation of Obama at the UN, when he blocked the Security Council from sanctioning US intervention in Syria, was a very clear indicator of the erosion of the unchallenged hegemony that Washington had enjoyed since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

7. Leaving aside the heightened inter-imperialist rivalry expressed in the Ukrainian conflict and mounting tensions between China and its neighbours in the Far East, in the Middle East, the unravelling of US strategy continues in the aftermath of its effective defeats in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the latter, the desperate attempt to secure control through the installation of a Shia communalist regime under Nouri al-Maliki has produced the ISIS-led Sunni uprising which threatens to tear the country apart altogether in a vicious sectarian civil war. This prospect has even obliged the Americans to look to their erstwhile Enemy Number One, Iran, for 'boots on the ground'. Could anything more clearly illustrate the decline of US power?

8. 'Declining power' should not, however, be read as 'loss of all power'. The USA remains by far the most powerful state both economically and militarily and, as the advance of NATO across Eastern and Central Europe to the very borders of the Russian Federation shows, it is guaranteed that every effort will be made to restore absolute supremacy. It is equally guaranteed that Russia and China, whether in concert or singly, will have to challenge the US on every front, fighting, in effect, to redivide the world, which, as Lenin explained nearly 100 years ago, is in the nature of the imperialist epoch.

9. For all imperialists, one tactic to advance that redivision is to support their rivals' 'internal' enemies, whether in the imperialist heartlands themselves or, more easily, in the semi-colonial countries through which they control the globe. It is therefore inevitable that each will attempt to suborn revolutionary movements in various countries all over the world. Revolutionaries in those countries will have to take advantage of these contradictions amongst the imperialist powers, just as the Bolsheviks did in 1917-18. After all, there is no revolutionary workers' state extant to hand over weapons 'without strings' to democratic and socialist revolutionaries.

10. The point is to cut the strings the imperialists attach and to avoid at all costs subordinating themselves to them and their strategy. With the development of new imperialisms, it is vital not to entertain illusions that one is better than another; the USA or EU because they are 'democratic', Russia or China because they are 'anti-imperialist' (let alone 'socialist' or 'communist?'). Absolute political class independence is the only guarantee of not being used and then discarded by any of these world robbers. Given the unavoidable national pressures on all revolutionary movements, the creation of a new revolutionary international party, a Fifth International, is the essential pre-requisite for the development and maintenance of the independent worldview of the international proletariat.

J. Defending, resuming and completing the revolutions

1. The serious advance of the counterrevolution in the Middle East and North Africa in 2013-14 is a result of the failure of the genuine revolutionary forces to complete the revolutions in 2011 and 2012; 'A revolution which stops halfway digs its own grave.'

2. Today, revolutionaries have to defend their gains against a ferocious counter-attack by the resurgent forces of the old regimes. They have the right to expect the solidarity, material and moral, of revolutionaries from outside the region. This includes aid to the ongoing struggles, like Syria, the fight for the right of asylum for those fleeing brutal repression and aid to create organising, publishing and communications centres abroad from which to organise underground work where this is needed. It means exposure of the crimes of the counterrevolution and also international political debate and discussion of the issues of the struggle.

3. Learning the lessons of defeats as well as victories is critical to turn the former into the latter. Without smashing the apparatus of repression, above all by spreading democracy to the barracks and taking the armed forces out of the hands of the reactionary high command inherited from the old regimes, counter-coups were, and are, inevitable.

4. The ordinary conscript soldiers must have full democratic rights including the right to gather and discuss in mass assemblies in the barracks, to submit their officers to election and to elect rank and file soldiers' committees or councils. Only this could ensure that the armed forces will never again be used as blind tools to make coups and defend dictatorships.

5. In the next resurgence of the revolution, the surviving or restored military dictatorships and the absolute and "constitutional" monarchies must be dissolved and their plunder, accumulated over decades, must be confiscated and used to meet the needs of the people. All the top officials of the regimes must be publicly brought to trial for their exploitation and repression of the people. All political prisoners must be released and all exiles given the right to return; the crimes against them must be publicised and the perpetrators brought to justice.

6. The police chiefs and torturers responsible for repression must be arrested and their crimes exposed. The Mukhabarat/military intelligence (secret police) and all the regimes' paramilitary squads, plus the gangs of baltageya (hatchet men) must be disarmed, disbanded and punished for their crimes.

7. Instead of the corrupted police forces that prey on the people, a militia of workers, youth and women, including people from the ethnic and religious minorities must be built. They will keep order on the streets and in the local communities, combating assaults, theft, rape etc, as well as counter-revolutionary and fascist forces. They must, however, act under the democratic supervision of local delegate councils, not under the influence of tribal, religious or criminal gangs.

8. There must be complete freedom to form political parties, to demonstrate, to meet, to have unfettered access to the broadcast media and to publish newspapers. Above all, there must be access to the media by the workers and youth who took the lead in the uprisings.

9. There must be an immediate rise in wages, a minimum wage that can support a family and a sliding scale of wages and income for the unemployed, to combat inflation. There must be an immediate mass distribution of food, fuel for cooking and heating, clothes and other life essentials to the poor.

10. The rights of women must be established; full equality before the law, equal entry into all educational professions, an end to compulsory dress codes, and separation of the sexes in public places and institutions, severe punishment of harassment, assault and rape. The provision of childcare (nurseries, crèches, including in factories offices etc.) is essential to remove all barriers to entry into the workforce. Vital, too, is the legal and actual implementation of equal pay. The abolition of patriarchal control over women is an especially revolutionary task. The right to access free and safe contraception and abortion is vital to enable women to have control over whether and when to have children. Women must control this,

not husbands, fathers or the clergy.

11. The unemployed, especially the huge numbers of educated but under utilised youth of both sexes, must be enrolled in programmes of socially valuable public works to replace the slums with decent housing, schools, clinics, etc.

Elections must take place, under the control and protection of workers' and popular committees and their militias, to a sovereign and revolutionary Constituent Assembly. Vital as it is, a fundamental law which protects the democratic rights of all citizens is not the central task of such an assembly. Rather, it must be debated before the whole nation (via TV, radio, live internet streaming, social media etc) exactly what should be the social foundation, the property relations, of the new republic.

12. Concretely, the masses must be directly engaged in a debate, via mass assemblies, over what should happen to the lands of the rich landowners, the vast property of the army chiefs, the factories and retail outlets. In short, this debate should focus on the issue of whether the revolution should establish not just democracy but also socialism.

13. As Trotsky foretold, and as the social counterrevolutions in Eastern Europe, Russia and China have demonstrated, socialism cannot be built in a single country. The revolution must become permanent, not only in the sense that it must advance resolutely from democratic rights to socialist tasks, but that it must spread to other countries in a regional and world revolution.

14. For this reason, even before the triumph of the revolution, there must be active support for popular uprisings and revolutions against the ruling tyrants in all the countries of North Africa and the Middle East; practical aid and solidarity with the Palestinians and against the blockade of Gaza.

15. To really complete the Arab revolutions, it is necessary for the working class and the unions to launch all out general strikes to force out any and every capitalist government, whether monarchy or republic, dissolving any fake do-nothing parliaments, replacing the feloul judges and electing new ones democratically, under the protection of the workers and revolutionary youth.

16. Revolutionary workers' and peasants' governments are the essential outcome of such a revolution. Their priority must be to address the burning material needs of the people with programmes of public works on urgent, socially necessary projects, funded by taxing or expropriating the rich as well as European and US big business interests.

17. The Arab revolutions, which began as democratic revolutions in January-February 2011, must be completed by uprooting all the repressive machinery of the dictatorships and monarchies and fulfilling all the democratic aspirations of workers, women and youth. To meet the burning needs of the people for jobs, food, land, health and education services and women's rights, a social revolution against capital is completely unavoidable. Without it, the democratic and anti-imperialist revolution will retreat and fail.

18. Only a socialist revolution, which overthrows the capitalist class, foreign and native, and builds a system based on workers' councils can solve the problems of the underpaid workers, the unemployed youth and the poverty stricken population of the towns and the countryside and unite the whole Middle East and North African region.

19. The spreading of the revolution must lead to the creation of a socialist federation of the entire Middle East and North Africa, to unite the forces of all against imperialism, to organise the maximum sharing of natural resources, the optimum development of the forces of production including, crucially, human labour, and to plan the elimination of poverty.

