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Turkey, Syria and the hypocrisy of US imperialism

14 June 2013

From the Bush administration's launching of the war of aggression against Iraq in 2003 through to the Obama administration's backing of a war for regime change in Syria a decade later, Washington has continuously draped its predatory policies in the Middle East in the false banners of "human rights" and "democracy."

Such claims have been thoroughly refuted, in the first instance, by the immense human suffering and oppression wrought by US militarism in the region. It is estimated that the US "liberation" of Iraq cost a million lives, turned millions more into refugees and lay waste to the country's infrastructure and social institutions. In Syria, the promotion of a sectarian civil war by US imperialism and its allies has claimed more than 80,000 lives, while again producing millions of refugees and ravaging an entire society.

Equally revealing is the collection of allies upon which Washington depends to pursue its strategic and profit interests in the Arab world. They are overwhelmingly reactionary monarchies that ruthlessly suppress any opposition within their own country: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan. These US-allied champions of democracy employ beheadings, torture, arbitrary imprisonment and religious obscurantism and persecution to sustain their parasitic dynasties.

Now, the social upheavals in what is arguably Washington's most important regional ally have torn to shreds the phony democratic pretenses and exposed the hypocrisy of US policy in the region.

The Obama administration has lent tacit support to the brutal repression unleashed by the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan against hundreds of thousands of young people, workers, professionals and other Turkish citizens who have taken to the streets of Istanbul, Ankara and scores of other cities across Turkey. The crackdown has left at least five people dead, sent some 5,000 people to the hospital and resulted in the arrests of thousands more.

The White House and the State Department maintained a discrete silence in the wake of the brutal assault on peaceful demonstrators in Taksim Square on June 11. As heavily armed riot police unleashed tear gas, water cannon and stun grenades against the protesters, injuring hundreds, no one in the Obama administration uttered a word about human rights or democracy.

A week earlier, the White House spokesman Jay Carney had issued a mealy-mouthed statement affirming Washington's platonic commitment to "freedom of expression and assembly," while warning protesters against "provoking violence."

After making it clear that Obama would make no statement nor would he speak to Erdogan about the repression, the spokesman concluded: "Turkey is a very important ally. And look, all democracies have issues that they need to work through ... I think that we continue to work with Turkey on a range of issues—as a NATO ally and as a key player in the region—and we look forward to doing that."

In calling Turkey a "key player in the region," Carney was obviously referring to its role as a safe haven and forward base for the Islamist militias that Washington has unleashed on Syria. Foreign fighters from as far away as Chechnya, the Balkans and Western Europe are funneled across the Turkish border; Turkey also hosts a CIA station that coordinates the flow of billions of dollars in money and arms provided by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Saudi Arabia to fuel the slaughter across the border.

Washington thus hypocritically claims that its war for regime change in Syria is driven by its horror at Assad's repression of armed Islamist opposition groups, but supports Erdogan's repression of peaceful protests that could interfere with US war plans.

None of this gives pause to the collection of pseudo-left organizations—from the International Socialist Organization in the US to the New Anti-Capitalist Party in France and the Left Party in Germany—who have lent their support to the imperialist war on Syria, proclaiming it a "revolution."

The events in Turkey and Syria, however, are intimately connected. Erdogan's participation in the US-led war against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is immensely unpopular with the Turkish people. Polls indicate that between 70 and 80 percent of Turkish citizens oppose this intervention.

There is widespread concern that the war being promoted by Erdogan in Syria will engulf Turkey itself. Twin car bombs killed 50 people in the town of Reyhanli on the Turkish border last month, followed by the arrest in the same region of 12 members of the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Nusra Front, who initial reports said had a quantity of deadly sarin gas.

The Turkish government's war policy is particularly unpopular among Turkey's major religious and ethnic minorities, such as the Alevis. Erdogan's backing for Al Qaeda-linked Sunni Islamist fanatics in Syria is an extension of his domestic policy of imposing Islamist social policies in Turkey. His decision to name a new bridge over the Bosphorus Strait after a 16th century Ottoman sultan who slaughtered tens of thousands of Alevis heightened these concerns.

In a more fundamental sense, the Turkish developments mirror those within the United States itself, with the turn towards militarism and intervention abroad feeding the growth of attacks on democratic rights and police state measures at home. In both countries, both foreign and domestic policies are pursued in the interest of ruling corporate and financial cliques at the expense of the broad masses of working people.

The moral charades performed by the Obama administration and its pseudo-left assets about "human rights" and "democracy" in Syria are, as the case of Turkey makes clear, completely hypocritical. They are designed to deceive the public about the criminal nature of Washington's escalating campaign of military aggression to secure US hegemony over the oil-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia—a campaign that threatens to drag the people of Turkey, the entire region and beyond into a bloody conflagration.

The struggle for the democratic and social rights of working people in Syria, Turkey and throughout the planet can be conducted only on the basis of the independent political mobilization of the working class in struggle against imperialism and the capitalist profit system.