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US Imperialism

The Empire in Decline

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Against the Current: From your vantage point both in Europe and the Middle East, can you describe how the U.S. election was viewed from abroad?

Gilbert Achcar: As you may imagine, reactions were different in Europe and the Middle East. In Europe, there was a kind of sigh of relief at the reelection of Obama. Because Romney was seen in a very negative light by most people, the most common comment was satisfaction that he wasn't elected.

In the Middle East there was much indifference this time – unlike in 2008, when there was so much enthusiasm for Obama for the obvious reasons of his color and background compared to the tradition of U.S. presidents. This had given way as Obama came to be seen as, at best, very weak in relation to the political establishment in the United States and especially Israel – in the way his administration bowed down in the face of Israeli arrogance and provocations. This created huge disappointment because people had illusions that things would be different.

Also in general, this administration has actually had to run the empire at the time when it's at its lowest point of prestige in the region. It came in the wake of the disastrous George W. Bush administration – disastrous from the point of view of the U.S. empire.

The neoconservative writer Charles Krauthammer had announced a “unipolar moment” in 1990 [unchallenged U.S. power as the Soviet bloc collapsed –ed.]. But not long after 9/11/2001, from 2003 onward with the invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration managed to dissipate all the political capital the United States had accumulated since 1990.

The United States has been facing in the very recent period a real decline in its influence, especially in the Middle East, from the peak of its hegemony in 1990-'91 when it waged the first war on Iraq.

The U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, without achieving a single one of the basic goals that the Bush administration had in mind when it invaded, is a tremendous defeat and disaster for U.S. power.

I think it was Henry Kissinger who said that if the United States were defeated in Iraq it would be “worse than Vietnam.” I think this has exactly happened, because what's at stake in the Middle East and Gulf is so much more than in Vietnam.

U.S. Isolated on Palestine

ATC: This brings up my next question, about the significance of the United Nations General Assembly vote on “non-member state” status for Palestine. This seems much more of a defeat for the United States than

anything it might mean for actually achieving a Palestinian state.

GA: Exactly – this is one of the most striking illustrations of what I was just saying. It is a real slap in the face and showed a degree of impotence of the empire that is quite amazing, and which we hadn't really seen since the previous era of decline in the 1970s. It now feels like the United States and Israel being isolated along with only Canada, the Czech Republic and some fictitious Pacific island states.

The way Europe in particular has broken with Washington is just an indicator of this decline in imperial power, especially when confronted with what is happening in the Middle East. The degree to which it lacks a real response to the events in the region and is just trying to adapt to the situation, with no real alternative to betting on the Muslim Brotherhood as it's attempting to do – all this indicates how much regional U.S. hegemony has been lost.

As for how much this has to do with "two states" (in Israel-Palestine), for those countries that voted in favor or abstained on the UN resolution, of course this was related to the two-state solution. They feel that a negative vote would be interpreted as a rejection of this formula that they've been advocating for ages. That's also how the Palestinian Authority presented the issue, as "the last chance for the two-state solution."

Among the Palestinians this was mostly seen as a moral victory, after such a long chain of defeats of all kinds and faced with an overwhelming military force like Israel which keeps up its onslaught on Gaza. The vote also came in the wake of another moral victory, the fiasco of Netanyahu's latest attack on Gaza.

ATC: Will Europe follow up on its anger over Israel's "E1" settlement expansion? [This project around East Jerusalem, announced by Israel following the UN vote, would cut the West Bank in half.]

GA: This remains to be seen, but the expression of anger this time is clearly higher than on previous occasions. This specific signal for settlement expansion is qualitatively more harmful than previous decisions, because of the issue of East Jerusalem and its implications for the territorial integrity of any hypothetical Palestinian state.

Netanyahu took the U.S. vote as a green light, so it's really the United States that bears the direct responsibility for this, even if Washington tried to distance itself. He wouldn't have dared to challenge the world and Washington – but Israel could challenge everyone else as long as the United States remains onside.

As we all know, Europe's leverage on Israel is relatively limited. There are means by which they could exert pressure – like stopping their privileged trading arrangements and effectively entering into BDS (Boycott/Divestment/Sanctions) territory. But any such thing is so far beyond Europe's policies that it's difficult to imagine.

The crux of the issue is that Israel is dependent above all on the United States, and the fact that even this president Obama, who in many ways was expected to be favorable to the Palestinians, relinquished any possible fight, is striking.

If you take the decades since Eisenhower, it's the Bush Senior administration that appears as the one that went furthest in pressuring Israel – in 1991, exactly at the peak of U.S. hegemony, when it pushed the Yitzhak Shamir government to join the Madrid negotiations. They threatened to withhold guarantees for a \$10 billion loan that Israel was seeking at the time. We haven't seen anything similar since then.

Of course Bush Junior was in total harmony with the most rightwing governments in Israel – where we have seen

since 2001 an uninterrupted move to the far right “but this has continued with Obama’s administration, which is a reflection of U.S. influence being in such deep decline. Washington is not in a position to put pressure on its most reliable ally.

ATC: My feeling was that there was a deal where Israel wouldn’t attack Iran against U.S. wishes, which would be crazy anyhow, while the United States would allow Israel to run wild in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Gaza. Does this make sense?

GA: I think such “deals,” if you like, aren’t explicit but can be implicit. The Obama administration has been faced with threats by Israel of unilateral action, and one should say that Obama’s reelection is a defeat for Netanyahu who was betting on Romney, in the belief that Romney would give a green light or even participate in a military action against Iran.

The truth is that not only the Obama administration but the top Pentagon brass is very worried about such a prospect (of an Israeli action). They aren’t willing to take such a big risk just for the sake of Netanyahu. The same is true of the Israeli military; there are even leaks and revelations from Israeli security and intelligence circles that this would be a crazy adventure. Iran has missiles and rockets and so does Hezbollah in Lebanon. It’s not risk-free as the onslaught in Gaza was for Israel.

The end result is that Netanyahu, having called an election for January, once he saw Romney was defeated reduced his ambitions and attacked Gaza in very much an electoral maneuver substituting for his desire to hit Iran. But it appears as a failure.

What will happen after that “I think it’s hard to imagine Israel launching an attack on a target like Iran without a clear green light from the United States. That would be so crazy that I don’t think the Israeli military would accept it.

ATC: You had accurately predicted that the victories of the nonviolent Arab Spring uprisings wouldn’t be repeated in the case of regimes like Syria. How do you see the crisis that has exploded there, and what are outside powers attempting to do?

GA: The United States and Europe, especially Britain, have had policies in the region to avoid what they regard as “chaotic” change. The motto in Washington very early on, from January 2011, was “orderly transition,” the phrase repeated countless times by U.S. officials including Obama and Hillary Clinton.

That was the kind of “orderly transition” they pushed on Yemen, with the aid of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) oil monarchies. It was a kind of accommodation that robbed the Yemeni popular movement of its victory, a completely frustrating compromise that isn’t working because it left the country completely unstable. They got a negotiated agreement where the president handed over power to his deputy while he continues behind the scenes and his family runs the military “a real attempt at aborting the revolutionary process.

That’s exactly what the United States seeks when there’s a huge mass uprising and change becomes inevitable “as in Libya, where the goal of the intervention was to try to control the process. Although they couldn’t do it on the ground because the Libyan rebels wouldn’t accept foreign troops, they kept negotiating with Qaddafi’s son (Seif al-Islam). But the insurgency wouldn’t abide such limitations, and the regime was ultimately brought down by the uprising in the capital.

In Syria they’ve again tried to achieve “transition” without giving any real support to the uprising. Of course there isn’t

direct U.S. or NATO military intervention, and the refusal to arm the uprising explains the big imbalance militarily between the rebellion and the regime. Obama himself had spoken of the “Yemen solution” for Syria. Not very long ago, British Prime Minister David Cameron had said Assad’s safety could be guaranteed if he left the country.

That’s imperial arrogance without limit. It indicates what these people are about, and how mistaken it is to believe that Washington is trying hard to overthrow the regime. Their main preoccupation is what Washington and London call “the lessons of Iraq,” where they dismantled the army and the Iraqi state, which was seen later as the major blunder. It’s a wrong assessment of the reasons for their defeat in Iraq, which run deeper than that — but from their own point of view they did make a huge blunder in dismantling the Baathist state, and they don’t want to repeat that.

They repeat the same formulas in regard to Syria — try to strike a deal with a major sector of the regime. They aren’t achieving success in this direction, any more than in Libya, because the conflict is such that it’s unimaginable, after so much destruction by a regime and ruling family that’s willing to destroy its own country, including whole cities like Homs and Aleppo — it reminds me of the Israeli onslaught in Lebanon and destruction of Beirut suburbs in 2006 — that people would be willing to coexist with any major section of such a state machine organized on such a sectarian basis. To believe that’s possible is completely illusory.

ATC: So where do you see the situation going from here?

GA: I don’t think there’s any other outcome than the end of the regime — the situation is completely irreversible. So the big question isn’t whether the regime will fall, but how soon. The longer it will take, the higher the human cost, and the political cost too because this is creating conditions for a deterioration of the political scene even within the uprising.

In the absence of western support, backing for the uprising has come from the Saudi monarchy funneled through fundamentalist forces. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of the regime, which said from the beginning that it was a big “conspiracy of the Salafists and al-Qaeda,” and did its best to produce this result. This of course is very worrying, and that’s why the longer the conflict carries on, the worse it is for the future of Syria.

It’s in the best interests of the future of Syria that the regime falls very soon. This seems rather difficult, unfortunately, although if you compare with last year when the situation was just beginning to militarize, the regime has lost a lot of ground and you see how quickly things can develop. It also depends on supplies for the uprising, and there have been reports of support from Qatar and insurgents acquiring surface-to-air missiles. But short of something like that or an internal collapse of regime forces, it may very well linger for several months, even a year or more.

ATC: Finally, there’s the new political crisis in Egypt. Can you briefly assess that?

GA: The issue in Egypt, on the one hand, is no surprise in that the Muslim Brotherhood is by far the most powerful organized force after the collapse of the Mubarak regime’s institutions. So their electoral victory was to be expected. The key point isn’t that they gained power, but the actual fragility of their victory. Morsi’s victory wasn’t overwhelming, and he doesn’t command any authority in the eyes of the mass movement.

As soon as he decreed the concentration of power, you have a big and continuing outpouring in opposition. The Muslim Brotherhood has a very powerful force that can organize masses, but what’s new is huge numbers of people willing to say “No.” In the long run this regime is actually quite weak, a “paper tiger,” in that they have no solutions to all the major economic and social problems that led to the anti-Mubarak uprising.

The Empire in Decline

The deep roots of all this are to be found in the economic problems and huge unemployment. Morsi's program amounts to nothing but a continuation of the previous regime; they've just signed an agreement with the International Monetary Fund with all the usual conditions, which will create even greater dissatisfaction.

So the upheaval that began in January 2011 is far from over. We are only at the beginning of a very long revolutionary process, and when you see the rapidity of the discrediting of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Tunisia, this gives reason for optimism about the future – not the pessimistic mood that we now find especially among so many people in the West, who had wrong expectations to begin with and now portray negatively the whole uprising.