

Obama in Cairo: a new face for imperialism

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The speech delivered by US President Barack Obama in Cairo yesterday was riddled with contradictions. He declared his opposition to the “killing of innocent men, women, and children,” but defended the ongoing US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the US proxy war in Pakistan, while remaining silent on the most recent Israeli slaughter of Palestinians in Gaza. These wars have killed at least one million Iraqis and tens of thousands in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Palestinian territories.

Obama declared his support for democracy, human rights and women’s rights, after two days of meetings with King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, two of the most notorious tyrants in the Middle East. He said nothing in his speech about the complete absence of democratic rights in Saudi Arabia, or about the ongoing repression under Mubarak’s military dictatorship. In the days before the US president’s arrival at Al-Azhar University, the campus was raided by Egyptian secret police who detained more than 200 foreign students. Before leaving on his Mideast trip, Obama praised Mubarak as a “steadfast ally.”

While posturing as the advocate of universal peace and understanding, Obama diplomatically omitted any reference to his order to escalate the war in Afghanistan with the dispatch of an additional 17,000 US troops. And he tacitly embraced the policy of his predecessor in Iraq, declaring, “I believe the Iraqi people are ultimately better off without the tyranny of Saddam Hussein.” He even seemed to hedge on the withdrawal deadline of December 2011 negotiated by the Bush administration, which he described as a pledge “to remove all our troops from Iraq by 2012.”

Obama rejected the charge that America is “a self-interested empire”—a perfectly apt characterization—and denied that the United States was seeking bases, territory or access to natural resources in the Muslim world. He claimed that the war in

Afghanistan was a “war of necessity” provoked by the 9/11 terrorist attacks. This is the same argument made by the Bush-Cheney administration at the time, which deliberately conceals the real material interests at stake. The war in Afghanistan is part of the drive by US imperialism to dominate the world’s two most important sources of oil and gas, the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Basin.

There was of course a distinct shift in the rhetorical tone from the bullying “you’re either with or against us” of George W. Bush to the reassuring “we’re all in this together” of Obama. But as several commentators noted (the *New Republic* compared the speech line-for-line to that given by Bush to the United Nations on September 16, 2006), if you turned off the picture and the sound and simply read the prepared text, the words are very similar to speeches delivered by Bush, Condoleezza Rice and other officials of the previous administration.

The vague and flowery rhetoric, the verbal tributes to Islamic culture and the equal rights of nations, constitute an adjustment of the language being used to cloak the policy of US imperialism, not a change in substance. Obama made not a single concrete proposal to redress the grievances of the oppressed peoples of the Middle East. That is because the fundamental source of this oppression is the profit system and the domination of the world by imperialism, of which American imperialism is the most ruthless.

Obama made one passing reference to colonialism, and to the US role in the overthrow of the democratically elected Mossadegh government in Iran in 1953. But in his litany of “sources of tension” in the region, he offered the same checklist as his predecessor, with the first place given to “violent extremism”, Obama’s rhetorical substitute for Bush’s “terrorism.”

The reaction to the Obama speech in the American media was across-the-board enthusiasm. Liberal David

Corn of *Mother Jones* magazine said Obama's advantages were "his personal history, his non-Bushness, his recognition of US errors, his willingness to at least talk as if he wants to be an honest broker in the Mideast."

Michael Crowley wrote in the pro-war liberal magazine *New Republic*, "to see him unfold his biography, to cut such an unfamiliar profile to the world, is to appreciate how much America will benefit from presenting this new face to the world."

Perhaps most revealing was the comment by Max Boot, a neoconservative arch-defender of the war in Iraq, who wrote: "I thought he did a more effective job of making America's case to the Muslim world. No question: He is a more effective salesman than his predecessor was."

In his speech in Cairo, Obama was playing the role for which he was drafted and promoted by a decisive section of the US financial elite and the military and foreign policy apparatus. This role is to provide a new face for US imperialism as part of a shift in the tactics, but not the strategy, of Washington's drive for world domination.

Nearly two years ago, former US national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski gave his public backing to the presidential candidacy of a still-obscure senator from Illinois, holding out the prospect that as an African-American with family ties to the Muslim world, Obama would improve the worldwide image of the United States.

Brzezinski was the leading hawk in the administration of Democrat Jimmy Carter and helped instigate the political upheavals in Afghanistan in the hopes of inciting a Soviet invasion that would trap the Moscow bureaucracy in a Vietnam-style quagmire. He has remained steadily focused on what he calls the "great chessboard" of Eurasia, and particularly on oil-rich Central Asia, where a struggle for influence now rages between the United States, Russia, China and Iran.

According to Brzezinski in August 2007, Obama "recognizes that the challenge is a new face, a new sense of direction, a new definition of America's role in the world... Obama is clearly more effective and has the upper hand. He has a sense of what is historically relevant and what is needed from the United States in relationship to the world."

Brzezinski, a ruthless defender of the interests of US imperialism, has repeatedly issued warnings to the American ruling elite of the danger of what he calls the "global political awakening."

In one particularly pointed comment, he told the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, only months before he endorsed Obama, that the vast majority of humanity "will no longer tolerate the enormous disparities in the human condition. That could well be the collective danger we will have to face in the next decades."

To call it by its right name, what the more perceptive elements in the US ruling class fear is world revolution. The effort to prevent such a social upheaval is what impelled them to install Obama in the White House and what set him on his pilgrimage to Cairo.

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