

Anti-US protests spread throughout Muslim world

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Protests that began one week ago at US embassies in Egypt and Libya against an anti-Islamic YouTube video are rapidly spreading throughout the Muslim world. The wave of demonstrations reflects the burning anger of hundreds of millions over the predatory policies of US imperialism. Over the weekend, the protests spread to some twenty countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia.

In US-occupied Afghanistan, police officials reported that several thousand marched in the capital, Kabul. They burned official cars, threw stones at the nearby US military base at Camp Phoenix, and burned shipping containers left outside the base.

In neighboring Pakistan, two protesters were killed in clashes with police as thousands of people marched in the cities of Karachi, Peshawar and Chaman. Several hundred people marched in Lahore and in the Lower Dir district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, near the Afghan border. The US embassy in Islamabad suspended operations for the day.

In Karachi, a protester was shot in the head and killed when police clashed with protesters to keep them from marching on the US consulate. Police arrested several dozen protesters after fighting broke out when police fired tear gas canisters into the crowd.

Protesters in the Lower Dir district set fire to a press club and a government building and surrounded a local police station. One protester was killed and two wounded by police gunfire.

In Bangladesh, Khaleda Zia of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party called on the US to ban the anti-Muslim film, as authorities tried to head off further protests. On Friday, some 10,000 protesters marched against the film, including in the capital, Dhaka, burning American and Israeli flags and carrying signs demanding an apology from President Barack Obama.

On Sunday, approximately 100,000 garment workers struck in an industrial zone in Narayanganj, 20 kilometers south of Dhaka, demanding shorter working hours and higher wages. Bangladeshi garment workers work 10-16 hours a day and earn \$37 a month, some of the lowest wages in the world. Amid rumors that a worker had been killed at one of the plants, workers blocked a highway connecting Dhaka to the port city of Chittagong and attacked police stations.

In India, one demonstrator was arrested at an anti-film protest in Srinagar in Muslim-majority Kashmir, where 15,000 Muslims had protested Friday, burning US flags and denouncing Obama as a terrorist. The US embassy reiterated calls for US citizens to avoid travel to the region.

Protests also spread to Southeast Asia. Police clashed with hundreds of demonstrators who burned effigies of Obama in front of the US embassy in Djakarta, Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country. Clashes were also reported in Medan, Bandung and Solo.

Approximately 3,000 protesters burned US and Israeli flags in the southern Filipino city of Marawi. The US and Japan closed their embassies in Thailand, a key US regional ally and host of CIA secret prisons, amid rumors that Muslims might organize protests in the capital, Bangkok.

In the Middle East, hundreds of youth continued protests in Yemen's capital, Sana'a, calling for the expulsion of the US ambassador. Last week, protesters attacked the US embassy in Yemen, where the US is waging a proxy war backing the regime of President Abd Rabbo Mansour el-Hadi. US drone strikes have killed hundreds in Yemen. Washington has suspended consular services in Yemen for the rest of September.

In Lebanon, hundreds of thousands of people marched in a demonstration called by the Shiite populist organization Hezbollah. Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah condemned the anti-Islamic video and criticized the US, which has inflamed sectarian tensions in the region as part of its Sunni-led proxy war against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, for sowing divisions between Christians and Muslims.

This followed Sunday's anti-war protests by thousands of people in the Turkish city of Antakya, near the border with Syria.

Attempts by the US media to portray these protests as driven by religious sentiment, or the "traditionalism" of the Middle East, are reactionary and self-serving. The protests reflect broad popular opposition to Washington's wars, its violation of elementary democratic rights in the conduct of the "war on terror," and its exploitation of the region as a source of cheap labor.

The outpouring of popular anger against the US speaks as well to deep disillusionment with President Obama, who early in his tenure promised to pursue a new, less oppressive US foreign policy in the Middle East. In the four years since his election, however, the reactionary character of Obama's foreign policy has been widely felt throughout the region.

His administration has defended the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, which cost over a million Iraqi lives and was launched on the basis of lies. Obama has continued the indefinite detention and torture of detainees at Guantánamo Bay, and expanded the use of drone strikes across the Middle East, Central Asia and parts of Africa, causing thousands of casualties.

Washington's response to the current protests exposes the hypocrisy underlying the wars it has carried out, in the name of democracy and human rights, in response to last year's revolutionary working class struggles against US-backed dictatorships in Egypt and Tunisia. Having authored wars in Libya and Syria supposedly to halt the suppression of popular protests, Washington now demands that its allies crack down on protests against US policies.

These wars themselves were largely based on Washington's backing of reactionary Sunni Islamist militias and terrorist groups tied to Al Qaeda. This policy has now backfired. It appears that the attack on the US consulate in Benghazi that resulted in the death of the US

ambassador to Libya and three other Americans was carried out by the Islamist group Ansar al Shariah. It and similar armed groups are able to operate freely amid the social chaos provoked by the US war and the overthrow of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

Amid rising popular protests as well as attacks on US interests by right-wing forces the US has promoted in the Middle East, there is a growing debate within the US ruling class on how to proceed in the region. Some within the foreign policy establishment are suggesting that Washington might consider making a deal with President Assad on the grounds that he would be a better guarantor of order in Syria than the Al Qaeda-type forces the US is backing against him.

Thus the *New York Times* wrote on Monday: “The turmoil has only sharpened a painful quandary... Should the United States and its allies remain wary of toppling Mr. Assad, one of the region’s last secular dictators, whose rule, however repressive, has kept the forces of populist Islam in check?”

The *Times* cites foreign policy experts who argue for continuing the US proxy war in Syria. However, it also cites Brian Katulis of the Center for American Progress, who notes: “These incidents will further give people pause because already our intelligence agencies have been telling us that amongst the Syrian opposition—the people who we’re supposed to support—some of them are Al Qaeda affiliates.”

This debate exposes the utter cynicism of Washington’s supposed opposition to repressive regimes and the criminal character of US foreign policy overall. Human rights, democracy, protection of civilians are all pretexts for a neo-colonial policy aimed at securing US hegemony in the Middle East and control over the region’s energy resources.

Whether a repressive regime (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, etc.) is an ally in the supposed struggle for democracy and peace or an enemy (Syria, Iran) is entirely dependent on Washington’s perception at a given time of its commercial and geo-strategic interests. There is a long list of one-time allies, including Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi, who were redefined as tyrants and targeted for destruction.

Washington views Middle East dictatorships as perfectly acceptable tools for use against popular opposition to US imperialism. It is prepared to make alliances with the most reactionary forces, including Al Qaeda, to suppress the working class.

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